OSPREY AIRCRAFT OF THE ACES • 37

Bf 109 Aces of the Russian Front

John Weal

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SERIES EDITOR: TONY HOLMES

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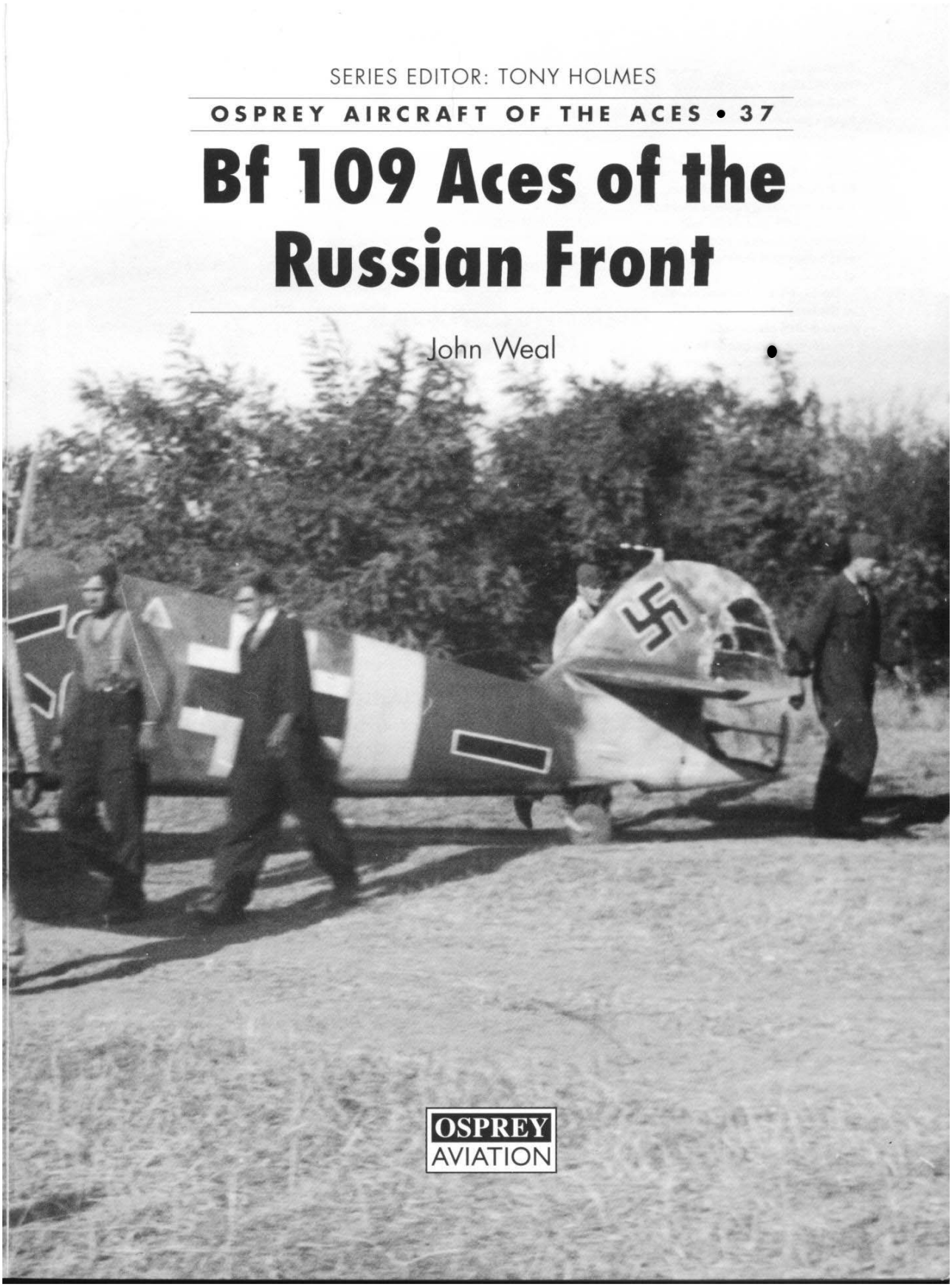

OSPREY AVIATION

Front cover
The 352 kills which made Erich Hartmann the most successful fighter pilot in the annals of aerial warfare were all scored with JG 52 – except one. For a few days early in February 1945, Hauptmann Erich Hartmann was appointed temporary acting *Kommandeur* of I./JG 53, a *Gruppe* which operated in close conjunction with JG 52 over Hungary in the closing weeks of the war.

During his brief tenure of office at the head of I. *Gruppe* of the famous 'Ace of Spades' *Geschwader*, Hartmann flew a winter-camouflaged *Gustav* bearing a simplified set of the same distinctive individual markings which had long adorned his JG 52 machines. Compare the truncated, unbordered 'tulip-leaf' nose decoration and plain red heart below the cockpit with those depicted in profile 22 in the colour section. Note, however, that the aircraft does wear the late-war Hungarian theatre marking of a yellow chevron below the port wing, its 'wraparound' ends just being visible on the leading-edge slot.

Here, Hartmann's tall-tailed G-6 pulls up and away from a smoking Airacobra, already *in extremis*, as he searches for more suitable prey. He would soon find it. One of a large gaggle of Yak-9 fighters escorting a formation of some 20 Soviet Air Force Douglas Bostons would provide 'Bubi' Hartmann with his 337th – and only non-JG 52 – victory of the war on 4 February 1945 (*Cover artwork by Iain Wyllie*)

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EDITOR'S NOTE

To make this best-selling series as authoritative as possible, the Editor would be interested in hearing from any individual who may have relevant photographs, documentation or first-hand experiences relating to the elite pilots, and their aircraft, of the various theatres of war. Any material used will be credited to its original source. Please write to Tony Holmes at 10 Prospect Road, Sevenoaks, Kent, TN13 3UA, Great Britain, or by e-mail at: tony.holmes@osprey-jets.freeserve.co.uk

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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

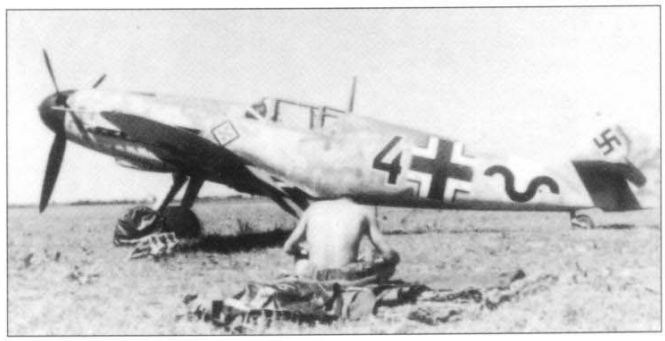
The German invasion of the Soviet Union, code-named Operation *Barbarossa*, was a campaign unparalleled in both its scale and ferocity. Within weeks of its launch early on the morning of 22 June 1941, the frontline stretched a staggering 2780 miles (4480 km), linking the Arctic wastes of the Barents Sea in the north to the sub-tropical shores of the Black Sea in the south.

At first glance, the opposing armies appeared to be almost evenly matched. The Germans committed 120 divisions to the initial assault, holding a further 26 in immediate reserve, making a total of 146 divisions – some three million men in all. Facing them, the Soviet army had 149 divisions stationed in its westernmost military districts.

But the German and Russian divisions differed greatly in composition and strengths. Take the all-important tank, for example, which played such a crucial role throughout the campaign in the east. At the outset the Germans deployed 17 armoured divisions (plus a further two in reserve) against the Soviet's 36 – a seeming majority of two-to-one in favour of the Red Army. In reality, a Russian armoured division of 1941 numbered some 400 tanks, whereas its German counterpart varied between 150 and 200 . . . a fourfold advantage to the Soviets.

At the start of *Barbarossa* the sole single-engined fighter presence in the far north was provided by the ten Bf 109Es of the *Jagdstaffel* Kirkenes. This E-7 (complete with dust filter!) patrols the barren shores of the Arctic Ocean . . .

On paper, the Red Air Force enjoyed a similar numerical superiority. It is a little remarked fact that the Luftwaffe embarked upon *Barbarossa*, the Wehrmacht's most ambitious undertaking, with far fewer frontline aircraft (2598) than it had deployed either at the start of the *Blitzkrieg* in the west in May 1940 (3826) or at the height of the Battle of Britain some three months later (3705).

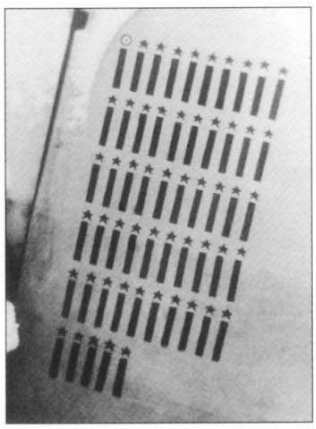


. . . whilst at the other end of the 2780-mile (4480-km) long front, this *Friedrich* rests between sorties safeguarding the Black Sea coast. Assigned to southernmost *Jagdgruppe*, III./JG 52, the aircraft was the mount of future Knight's Cross winner Obergefreiter Friedrich Wachowiak

In terms of single-engined fighters, the *Jagdwaffe* had exactly 619 serviceable machines (predominantly Bf 109Fs) ranged along the eastern front on the eve of the invasion. This was just over two-thirds (68 per cent) of the fighter arm's total available strength, the remaining third being deployed in the west, the homeland and the Mediterranean.

Yet it was in the east that Luftwaffe fighter pilots (understrength and overstretched as they were) would achieve the highest individual scores in the history of aerial warfare – scores that would be deemed impossible in other theatres and by other air forces.

Osprey's *Aircraft of the Aces* series has been based throughout on the accepted British and American definition of an 'ace' as being any fighter pilot with five or more aerial victories to his credit. Using this figure as a yardstick, a volume of this size dealing with the subject of the Bf 109 pilots on the eastern front would perforce consist of little more than a list of names. There are well over 5000 Luftwaffe fighter pilots in this category!



Indicative of the imbalance between the eastern and western fronts, the scoreboard on the rudder of this machine shows that its pilot, Oberfeldwebel Edmund Wagner of 9./JG 51, had claimed just one western victory prior to *Barbarossa*. With the first snows of the winter just starting to fall, Wagner has already added 54 Soviet kills. He would achieve two more before being killed in action against low-flying Pe-2s on 13 November 1941

In fact, the *Jagdwaffe* itself did not often use the dogmatic term *'As'* (ace) in relation to a specific number of victories. They preferred the more generic *'Experte'*, which was taken to mean any pilot of outstanding ability and achievement. The author has spoken to several Luftwaffe fighter pilots credited with 50 or more aerial victories – a far higher total than any western Allied ace – only to be told, in all seriousness, 'I was no great *Experte*. You really ought to talk to . . .', and here would follow the name of some stellar individual with three or four times the number of the speaker's own kills.

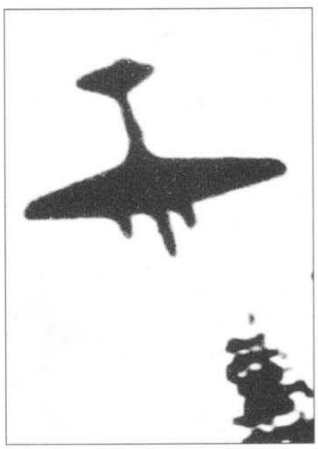
Another of JG 51's NCO pilots, Oberfeldwebel – later Leutnant – Otto Gaiser is representative of the many hundreds of eastern front flyers who amassed scores in the high double figures, and yet who are practically unknown today. Gaiser had claimed 74 victories by the time he too was killed in a low-level encounter (this time with four Il-2 *Stormoviks*) early in 1944

In the history of aerial warfare, only two fighter pilots have achieved more than 300 victories – Hauptmann Erich Hartmann (left) and Major Gerhard Barkhorn (right), both of JG 52

II./JG 3's Oberfeldwebel Ullmann points to an area on the map where he has just downed an enemy machine. The *Werkmeister* of 6. *Staffel* has reason to look doubtful, for the crash site could not subsequently be located, and the claim remained unconfirmed

The Luftwaffe hierarchy seems to have been taken almost unawares by the success of its own fighter pilots. In the opening months of the war 20 aerial victories would ensure the claimant the award of the Knight's Cross. Towards the close of hostilities some long-serving pilots would have amassed well over 100 kills in the east before they received this coveted decoration.

Nothing better illustrated the yawning chasm between eastern and western front conditions than the prestigious 'century' of kills. Only a select handful of Luftwaffe fighter pilots topped the 100 mark in action solely against the western Allies. By contrast, over 70 pilots achieved this feat in the east. Eight claimed more than 200 victories, and two even surpassed the 300 figure!



Oberleutnant Kurt Sochatzy, *Staffelkapitän* of 7./JG 3, was more fortunate. A witness on the ground took this telephoto shot of one of his victories – a Tupolev twin – as it headed down into the trees with no chance of recovery. Sochatzy claimed 38 Soviet kills (and a single No 603 Sqn Spitfire whilst on the Channel Front) before being rammed during a dogfight with an I-16 over Kiev on 12 August 1941. He would spend the next eight years in captivity in the USSR

In the light of post-war investigation, it is now conceded that overclaiming occurred in every air force. Mostly this was attributable to the heat and confusion of battle. Sometimes it was a case of genuine error – the trail of smoke emitted by a Bf 109 diving away at full throttle fooled many an Allied fighter pilot or air gunner into believing that his opponent was mortally hit. Only in very rare instances was it a matter of deliberate deceit. And any pilot suspected of falsifying his victory claims was given very short shrift by his peers.

Each of the combatant air forces tried to regulate claims by a strict set of conditions. None more so than the Luftwaffe, which required written confirmation of the kill by one or more aerial witnesses to the action, plus – if possible – back-up confirmation, also in writing, from an observer on the ground. Given the amount of paperwork this engendered back at OKL in Berlin, it is little wonder that it could sometimes take a year or more for a pilot's claim to receive official confirmation.

Despite such bureaucratic safeguards, some of the more astronomical claims by Luftwaffe pilots on the eastern front still remain the subject of discussion, doubt and downright disbelief. So how were they achieved?

There is no simple answer, but rather a unique set of circumstances which was not replicated in any other campaign.

Firstly, it must be borne in mind that Luftwaffe pilots did not fly 'tours', with lengthy breaks in between, as was the practice in Allied air forces. Most remained operational until either killed, incapacitated or elevated to a staff position. Apart from periods of leave, there were many who served in frontline units throughout the entire war, from the first day of hostilities until the last.

Also, for much of the air war in the east, the *Jagdwaffe* enjoyed undisputed superiority in those three essentials to survival and success – equipment, training and tactics.

The Bf 109 was a far better fighting machine than anything the Soviets possessed during the early years of the air war in the east. In the opinion of some veterans it remained so until the very end – 'unencumbered (i.e. without additional underwing weaponry such as gondolas or rocket tubes), the Bf 109 was superior to the Russian Yak-9'.

Major Gerhard Barkhorn is congratulated upon the completion of his 1000th operational sortie. The ribbons on the garland list the countries over which he has fought since joining II./JG 52 in August 1940 – (from bottom left) Denmark, Belgium, Soviet Union, France, England and Holland. By war's end Barkhorn would have flown no fewer than 1104 missions

The barrel-like shape of an abandoned I-16 sitting alongside this *Friedrich* of II./JG 54 illustrates the yawning chasm in design technology between the Soviet and German fighter arms during the opening phases of *Barbarossa*

Secondly, all *Jagdwaffe* combat leaders had enjoyed the priceless benefit of thorough training. Ironically, some – such as Lützow and Trautloft – had even attended the clandestine fighter training school at Lipezk, north of Voronezh, which the *Reichswehr* had operated in conjunction with the Soviets between the years 1925 to 1933. Many had also flown with the *Condor Legion* in Spain, and more recently a great number of fighter pilots had seen action in Poland, the west and the Balkans. This wealth of expertise and experience in turn gave them the flexibility to devise new and effective tactics to counter any situation they might meet in the air.

Much of the above could equally well apply to all the other campaigns in which the *Jagdwaffe* was involved. What made the eastern front different was the second half of the equation – the nature and make-up of the opposition.

The Stalinist purges of the late 1930s had emasculated the Soviet armed forces, cutting huge swathes through their ranks. Many air force officers, including those with recent combat experience (in Spain, the Far East and Finland), were dismissed, imprisoned or worse. This not only robbed the Red Air Force of an invaluable core of experts, it thoroughly cowed those who remained, stifling any initiative they might otherwise have displayed, and ensuring that they followed every official operational edict to the letter irrespective of the consequences.

In an effort to make good the losses brought about by its own actions, the Kremlin then ordered a rapid expansion of Russia's armed forces. But time was not on the Soviets' side. With the emphasis on numbers rather than quality, pilot training was hurried and perfunctory. Consequently their performance was, in general, of a much lower standard than that of the Luftwaffe during the opening rounds of *Barbarossa*. This inflexibility and inexperience is borne out by the combat reports of German pilots, which are full of accounts of formations of Russian aircraft either 'sticking rigidly to their course and altitude as they were chopped down one by one', or 'milling about in the air like a huge, chaotic swarm of bees'.

Inadequate training does not imply lack of courage on the part of the Soviet pilots. Quite the reverse. Unable to bring down their opponents in any other way, many resorted to ramming. Dubbed 'taran' attacks by the Russians, the first recorded instance of this ultimate act of desperation occurred within minutes of the launch of *Barbarossa*.

Although not a high scorer himself, Hannes Trautloft's wealth of early experience – from the Lipezk training establishment to service with the *Condor Legion* in Spain – made him the archetypal fighter leader. He commanded JG 54, the famous 'Green Hearts', from 1940 to 1943

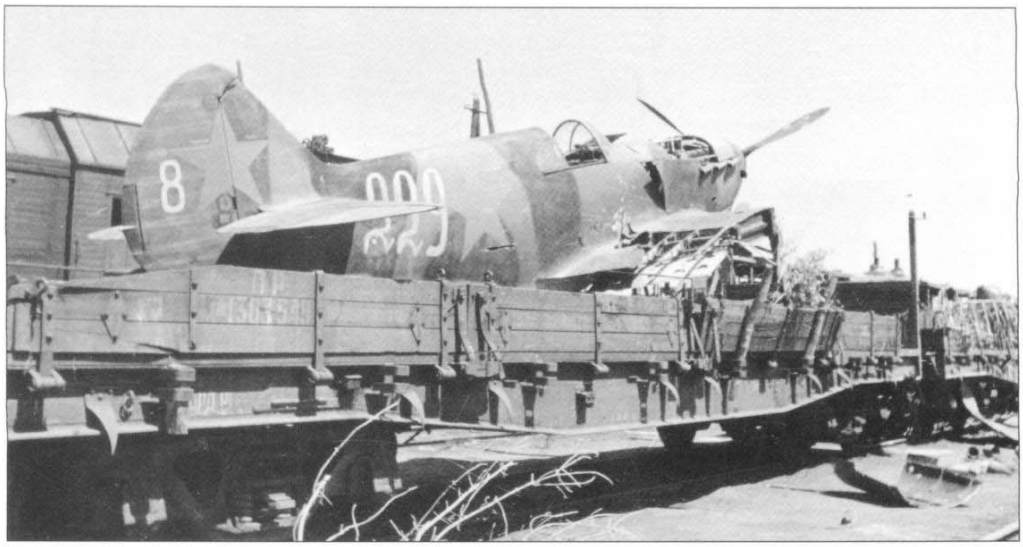
At 0415 hrs on 22 June Junior Lieutenant D W Kokoryev of the 124th Fighter Regiment knocked the tail off a reconnaissance Do 215 near Sambruv after the guns of his MiG-3 had jammed. Ten minutes later the 46th Regiment's Senior Lieutenant I T Ivanov despatched a He 111 bomber in similar fashion during a dogfight above Rovno. Unlike the former, Ivanov did not survive his encounter. On 2 August he was posthumously awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

The early battles took a heavy toll of the Red Air Force. Anxious to replace their losses and get pilots to the front as quickly as possible, training programmes did not rise above the barely adequate for many months. It was not until the latter stages of the campaign that a marked improvement came about. But by that time the Luftwaffe's many *Experten* had themselves gained two or three more years of eastern front experience. And although they took no chances with their Soviet opponents – never knowing when they might come up against one of the Red Air Force's 'naturals' – most are convinced that they retained a definite edge over the Russian rank and file throughout.

The same totalitarian obsession with numbers governed the Kremlin's dictates to the Soviet aircraft industry. The portly Polikarpovs which had fought for Republican Spain were obsolete or obsolescent by the summer of 1941. Three 'modern' designs had begun to enter service in 1940. But all suffered severe teething problems and were full of faults.

The Yak-1 was unreliable and had poor firepower. Both the LaGG-3 and MiG-3 lacked manoeuvrability, and were particularly unforgiving to novice pilots. Those selected to fly the LaGG joked grimly (but only amongst themselves) that the aircraft's initials stood for 'Lacquered Coffin Guaranteed'. Even pilots with many hours on Polikarpovs found the new monoplanes sluggish and hard to handle.

Despite this, production figures came before performance. Numbers of aircraft at the front were all that mattered to Moscow. As with the pilot training programmes, the situation gradually improved. Both Lavochkin and Yakovlev subsequently developed excellent fighters out of their original designs. But it all took time. Indeed, the world would have to wait until 1950, and the war in Korea, before discovering what the Mikoyan bureau could really do – and even then the revolutionary



This LaGG-3 'lacquered coffin', showing signs of combat damage to the starboard wing root, was captured by German troops on a Soviet railway freight wagon before it could be transported to the rear for repair

MiG-15 jet fighter relied heavily on captured German research and British engine design.

Much has been made of the Lend-Lease aircraft delivered to the Soviet Union to 'bridge the gap' between the initial shock of *Barbarossa* and Russian industry's gearing up to full production after evacuating its manufacturing plants to safety beyond the Ural mountains. Indeed, between 1941 and 1945 the United States alone despatched close to 10,000 fighters to Russia.

But here, too, quantity ruled over quality, for over 7000 of these machines were mid-engined Bell P-39s and P-63s. The former type was deemed 'specially disappointing' as an interceptor by the USAAF, and rejected by the RAF after just one operational mission. Both Bell fighters were extensively used by the Red Air Force, although mainly for close support and ground-strafing operations. Obsolescent P-40s were also

Not every flyer who was forced to land behind enemy lines was as lucky as the unknown pilot of this II./JG 53 machine. He was picked up by a patrol of the 16. SS Grenadier Division *'Reichsführer SS'* and brought back to safety

supplied in great numbers, although less than 200 P-47s were received by the USSR, and not a single P-51 – the only Mustangs to arrive in Russia were ten Allison-engined Mk Is from RAF stocks.

The British also provided over 4000 Hurricanes and Spitfires, and although both types gave a good account of themselves, the latter, in particular, was not ideally suited to the often primitive conditions to be found on Soviet forward landing grounds.

Lastly, to tactics. Despite the vast distances involved, the air war in the east was essentially a non-strategic conflict. Both air forces concentrated primarily on direct, medium to low-level support of ground operations. For reasons which will become clear, Luftwaffe fighter pilots were loath to venture too far behind the Russian lines.

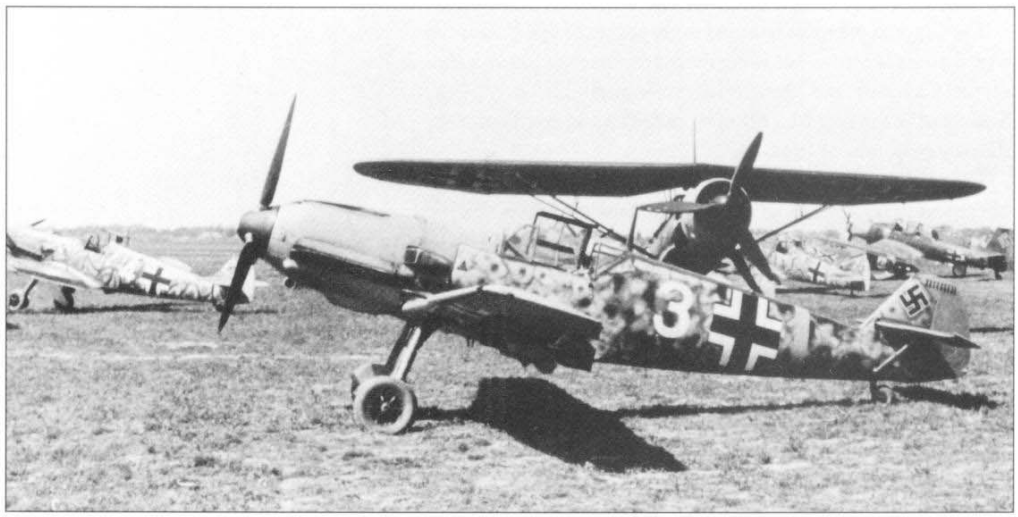
The Soviet High Command, for its part, was as rigid – and almost as profligate – in the control and use of its pilots and aircrew as it was with its foot soldiers. Just as, on the ground, wave after wave of Red infantrymen would be hurled, regardless of losses, against an entrenched German position in a series of frontal assaults until either none of the attackers was left standing or the defences were overwhelmed, so, in the air, wave after wave of Soviet aircraft were despatched to bomb targets along the German frontline.

The defending Luftwaffe fighter pilots, usually based close to the action, often flew as many as five or six – or even more – sorties per day. Patrolling the front, they would dive on the enemy machines, knock down one or two, break up the formation, and then climb back up to altitude to await the next incoming wave.

Although an oversimplification, such was the essence of air combat on the eastern front. Attempting to swamp the enemy by sheer weight of numbers, the Soviets bore the inevitable attrition with stoicism. The Luftwaffe's *Experten* reaped the rewards.

As to the campaign itself, the eastern front was divided into three main sections, or axes of advance – northern, central, and southern (four, if one includes the somewhat isolated far northern Finnish/Arctic region, which was a more static area of operations).

A crowded airfield towards the close of the campaign in the Balkans. On the original print the markings of the *Emil* seen below the port wing of the Henschel Hs 126 can just be made out. They reveal it to be the machine of the *Gruppen-Adjutant* of II./JG 54, Leutnant Steindl . . .



. . . who is pictured here flying the same E-7 on a *Jabo* mission only a matter of days later at the start of *Barbarossa*. In the interim, however, the narrow yellow band aft of the fuselage cross has been dispensed with, and the unit's distinctive 'crazy paving' camouflage pattern is already beginning to show through the thin coat of yellow wash hastily applied to the engine cowling

Despite the much greater length of the front, the Luftwaffe embarked upon *Barbarossa* in tried and tested fashion – by mounting a series of pre-emptive strikes that were designed to destroy the enemy air force on the ground. In this they proved remarkably successful. But the seeds of Germany's ultimate defeat had already been sown.

Hitler's intention to invade the Soviet Union had first been spelled out in his *Führer* Directive No 21 of 18 December 1940. He originally planned to launch Operation *Barbarossa* in the late spring of 1941. But the difficulties his Axis partner Mussolini was experiencing in Greece, and a revolt by the people of Yugoslavia against joining the Tripartite Pact (of Germany, Italy and Japan) persuaded him instead first to subjugate the Balkans.

This put *Barbarossa* back by a few vital weeks. The Wehrmacht's initial objective was Moscow. By 15 November 1941 a reconnaissance detachment of *Panzerpionierbataillon* 62 was just 12 miles (20 km) short of the Kremlin. But the winter snows brought the German army to a halt. The Russian capital held, and the *Führer* had lost his one chance for a 'speedy conclusion' to the campaign in the east.

The German offensive resumed in the spring of 1942. This time it was aimed not at Moscow, but along the southern sector towards the oilfields of the Caucasus and the city of Stalingrad. The 6. *Armee* reached Stalingrad late in August, only to be encircled and destroyed there during the winter months of 1942-43.

The epic battle of Stalingrad is regarded by many as the turning point of the war in the east. In fact, it was the third annual German offensive, launched on the central sector in the mid-summer of 1943, which really marked the beginning of the end for the Wehrmacht in Russia. Operation *Zitadelle*, better known as the battle of Kursk, was the greatest tank battle in military history. When Hitler ordered his armour to disengage on 13 July, it was more than a tacit admission of a local reversal. It paved the way for the huge Soviet advances of 1944-45, which would end with the Red Army in the centre of Berlin.

This, then, was the broad and sombre canvas against which the most successful fighter pilots the world has ever seen – or is ever likely to see – shone so briefly, and yet so brightly.

BARBAROSSA – THE EARLY ADVANCES

The first kill on the eastern front was claimed by the *Staffelkapitän* of 1./JG 3, Oberleutnant Robert Olejnik, who described the historic action in the following report;

'Everybody knew that I was an early riser and liked to fly the dawn missions. So, shortly before 0330 hrs, I took off with my wingman to reconnoitre the Russian airfields along our stretch of the border.

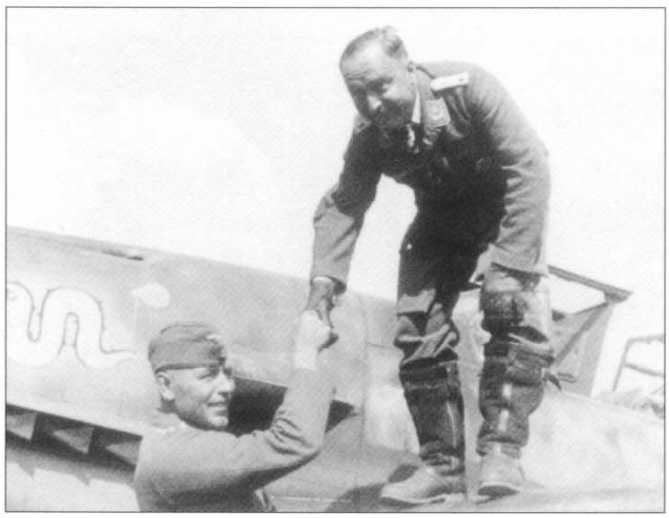
'Everything seemed quiet in the semi-darkness below. It was not until we were returning to base, and flying back over the first airfield we had visited some 20 minutes earlier, that I spotted signs of activity.

'Two Russian fighters were preparing to scramble. As we circled 700-800 metres (2300-2600 ft) overhead, I saw the Russians start their engines and begin to taxi out. They took off immediately and climbed towards us, obviously looking for a fight.

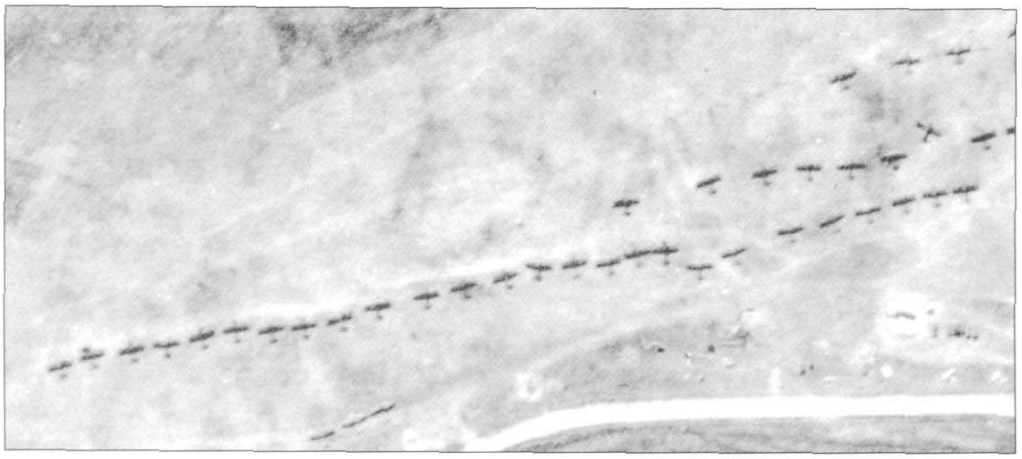
'They were still some 300-400 metres (980-1300 ft) below us when we dived to the attack. I caught the leader with a short burst on my first pass and he went down in flames. His wingman disappeared.

'Arriving back over our own airfield I waggled my wings to indicate a victory. My comrades, most of whom had only just woken up, peered sleepily from their tent flaps shaking their heads in disbelief.'

But some confusion surrounds the exact time of Olejnik's kill. The unit diary credited him with the destruction of an I-16 at 0340 hrs – just 25 minutes after the opening artillery salvoes of *Barbarossa* had rent the pre-dawn darkness – whereas he himself logged the 'Rata' ('Rat') as going down at 0358 hrs.



Oberleutnant Robert Olejnik who, by his own account, claimed the first aerial kill of *Barbarossa* is greeted by his chief mechanic, Feldwebel Mackert, upon his return from another successful mission some weeks later. The Knight's Cross, awarded for 32 victories, is just visible around Olejnik's neck. Note also I./JG 3's *'Tatzelwurm'* (Dragon) emblem, which would be retained after the *Gruppe's* redesignation as II./JG 1



A Luftwaffe reconnaissance photo of a Soviet airfield with rows of fighters lined up wingtip to wingtip. The constant chord wings would suggest that the majority of these machines are Polikarpov biplanes. Targets such as this were the first priority of the new *Blitzkrieg* in the east

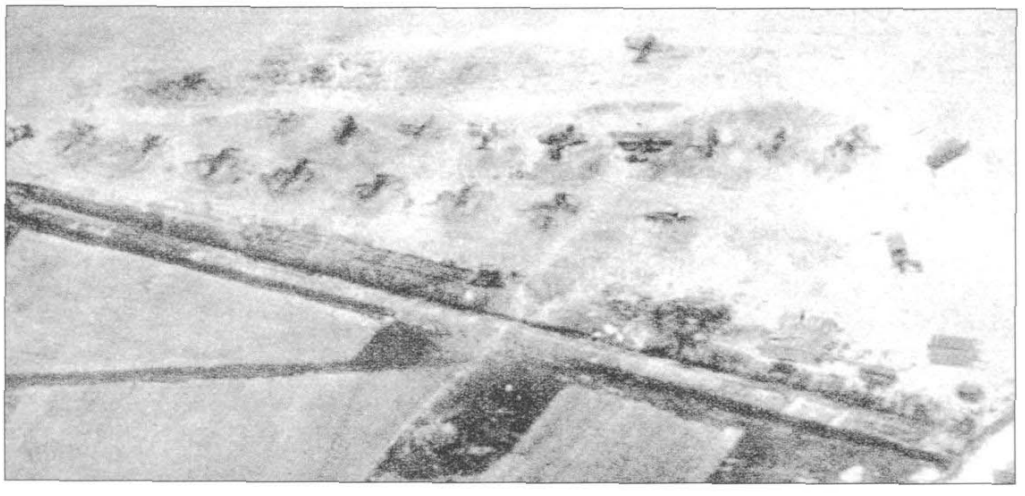
Another strong contender for the distinction of claiming the first aerial kill of the eastern front campaign must therefore be 5./JG 27's Leutnant Hans Witzel, who downed one I-15 at 0354 hrs, followed by another just 60 seconds later.

One fact not in dispute, however, was that the Luftwaffe's pre-emptive strikes had caught the Soviet Air Force completely off guard. All along the front the scene was the same as that described by Robert Olejnik's *Gruppenkommandeur*, veteran Channel front *Experte* Hauptmann Hans von Hahn;

'We could hardly believe our eyes. Every airfield was chock full of reconnaissance aircraft, bombers and fighters, all lined up in long straight rows as if on a parade. The number of landing strips and aircraft the Russians had concentrated along our borders was staggering.'

Staggering, too, was the price the Soviets paid for their unpreparedness. The Luftwaffe fighter pilots had a field day.

In the northern sector Major Hannes Trautloft's JG 54 had claimed 45 Russian aircraft shot down by the close of the first day's fighting, and the attached II./JG 53 had added a dozen more.



The result of one early strike. Of the nearly two-dozen aircraft visible here, all but two have been reduced to piles of wreckage. Although seemingly intact, the I-16 at the top of the picture is resting on its starboard wingtip. Below it a biplane is still upright, but no doubt badly damaged by debris from the machine still burning to its right

Hauptmann Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke, *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 53, shot down five Soviet fighters on the opening day of *Barbarossa*

Leutnant Jürgen Harder of Wilcke's *Gruppenstab* returned to Sobolevo on the afternoon of 22 June with his first kill under his belt. Like the *Kommandeur's* fifth victory of the day, it was identified as an 'I-17', and has already been recorded by the single bar seen here at the top of the rudder hinge line of Harder's *Friedrich*

JG 53's other two *Gruppen*, deployed in the central sector – the scene of the invasion's main thrust – accounted for no fewer than 62 Soviet aircraft. Hauptmann Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke, *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 53, was perhaps the eastern front's first ace, for he downed five Soviet fighters in the course of three separate sorties on 22 June. Wilcke's victims comprised a trio of I-15s shortly after 0400 hrs, a single I-16 later in the morning, and an 'I-17' in the afternoon.

The actual identity of Wilcke's fifth and final kill of the day remains conjectural. The shortcomings of Germany's intelligence services, combined with an almost paranoid secrecy on the part of the Soviets, meant that the Luftwaffe embarked upon *Barbarossa* without a proper grasp of the Soviets' – admittedly somewhat complicated – system of aircraft designation. This in turn has meant that there is a great deal of confusion surrounding many of the early claims submitted by German fighter pilots.

'If an aircraft looks right, it is right.' But not always. The MiG-3's sleek lines belied its sluggish performance in the air, while on the ground the length of that streamlined cowling meant that forward visibility when taxying was almost nil

The I-17, for example, was a Polikarpov design of the mid-1930s. It was powered by a water-cooled engine in a long streamlined nacelle, but never progressed beyond the prototype stage. Nearly every reference to an 'I-17' (or 'I-18') shot down during the opening months of the war in the east was almost certainly the result of an encounter with one of the 'new'

generation of Russian in-line engined fighters – almost certainly the MiG-3, which did bear more than a passing resemblance to published photos of the earlier Polikarpov I-17, and which was in service in far greater numbers at the beginning of *Barbarossa* than either of its Lavochkin or Yakovlev contemporaries.

Many Luftwaffe pilots also retained the habit (prevalent in the days of the *Condor Legion*) of referring to Polikarpov biplanes as 'Curtiss' fighters. Likewise, the Soviets' Tupolev SB-2 twin-engined bombers were commonly known as 'Martins' on account of their similarity to the American Martin B-10.

Future Knight's Cross holder Franz Schiess, who flew with the *Geschwaderstab* of JG 53, quickly developed a healthy respect for the agile Polikarpovs;

'We became involved with a group of about 20 Curtiss fighters, whose pilots clearly knew what they were doing. They let us get on their tails and almost into firing position. Then they suddenly pulled a 180-degree turn and we found ourselves shooting at them from head-on. In such a situation a kill becomes a matter of luck.'

Schiess nevertheless managed to claim his first victory – an I-153 – at 0725 hrs on that 22 June.

Also in the central sector, JG 51 was credited with 69 aerial victories. Four of that number had fallen to the guns of the *Geschwaderkommodore*, Oberstleutnant Werner Mölders. This took his personal score to 72, and won him the immediate award of the Swords to his Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves (just one day after the same honour had been conferred upon his arch rival, Oberstleutnant Adolf Galland, *Kommodore* of JG 26 back in France – see Osprey *Aircraft of the Aces 29 - Bf 109F/G/K Aces on the Western Front*).

'Vati' ('Daddy') Mölders, arguably the most famous and revered Luftwaffe fighter pilot of them all, had warned his pilots on the eve of *Barbarossa* that the coming campaign against Russia would not only be hard, but could also last a very long time. He would not live to see his predictions come true.

In just three weeks of action against the Soviets he added another 27 kills to his tally. Then, on 15 July, two more victories brought his total to 101. Mölders, who had not only been the *Condor Legion's* top scorer with 14 kills, but had also been the first Luftwaffe pilot to achieve 20 victories in World War 2, and thus received the *Jagdwaffe's* first Knight's Cross, had now become the first fighter pilot in history to reach the century mark.

This feat earned him the Diamonds to his Swords (in yet another 'first', he was the first of only 27 members of the entire German armed forces – seven of them *Jagdflieger* – to receive this prestigious decoration. But the award of the Diamonds brought

Oberst Werner Mölders, the Luftwaffe's first *General der Jagdflieger*, is seen on a tour of inspection in the early autumn of 1941. He is flanked by Major Günther Lützow, *Kommodore* of JG 3 (right), and Hauptmann Karl-Gottfried Nordmann, *Kommandeur* of IV./JG 51 (left). The latter pair are both already wearing the Oak Leaves to their Knight's Crosses (awarded in July and September for 42 and 59 victories respectively)

with it an immediate ban on all further operational flying. Promoted to the rank of Oberst, Werner Mölders was appointed to the newly-established office of *General der Jagdflieger*.

It was while on a tour of inspection of fighter units on the eastern front in November 1941 that he was informed of the death of World War 1 ace Ernst Udet, and instructed to return forthwith to Berlin to form part of the guard of honour at the late *Generalluftzeugmeister's* (Chief of Aircraft Procurement and Supply's) state funeral.

Mölders took off for the German capital in a Heinkel He 111. The weather was appalling, with the forecasters predicting that even worse was to come. But Mölders overrode the Heinkel pilot's objections and ordered him to continue – he had to get to Berlin on time. After departing Lemberg (Lvov) on the last leg of the flight, however, conditions deteriorated to such an extent that even the *General der Jagdflieger* was forced to admit defeat.

He instructed the pilot to head for the nearest airfield. Now reportedly flying on only one engine, the Heinkel crabbed towards Breslau. During the final approach a factory chimney suddenly loomed out of the murk and driving rain. The experienced NCO pilot managed to avoid the obstacle, but could then no longer hold the wallowing transport. It smashed to earth on Martin Quander's poultry farm at exactly 1130 hrs on 22 November.

The whole nation mourned the passing of one of its greatest heroes. A plaque to mark the spot where Mölders had perished was erected on Quander's premises at No 132 *Flughafenstrasse* (Airfield Road) – they had come that close to making it!

But to return to the opening day of *Barbarossa*.

The third *Jagdgeschwader* deployed on the central sector was JG 27 (more accurately, that unit's II. and III. *Gruppen*, plus the attached II./JG 52, the latter taking the place of the absent I./JG 27, which was currently in North Africa). These *Gruppen* achieved far fewer aerial victories in their first pre-emptive strikes against the Red Air Force. II. and III./JG 27, for example, were credited with just eleven and two kills respectively.

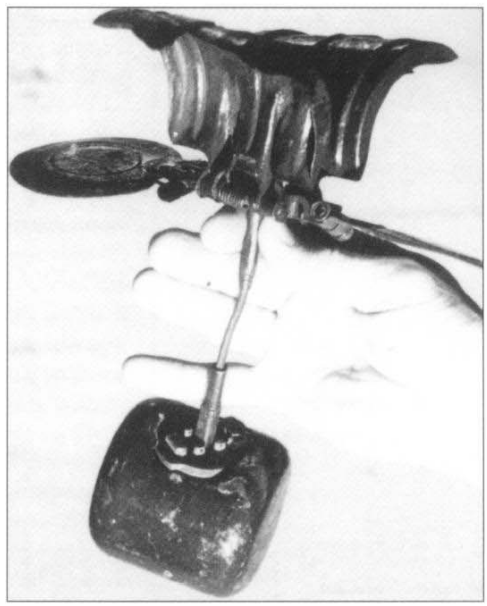
The two southern sector *Jagdgeschwader*, JGs 3 and 77, also submitted far fewer claims than the bulk of the units stationed along the central and northern fronts. JG 3's kills totalled 25, including one (listed as an 'I-18') for *Geschwaderkommodore* Major Günther Lützow.

The majority of the victories, 15 in all, had been achieved by Hauptmann Lothar Keller's II./JG 3. The *Gruppenkommandeur* himself claimed four – a brace each of I-16s and I-153s – which took his overall score to 20. Four of Keller's pilots opened their scoreboards on this day too. Among them was Oberleutnant Walther Dahl – a future Oak Leaves recipient, noted *Sturm* leader, and the Luftwaffe's last *Inspekteur der Tagjäger* (Inspector of Day Fighters) – whose first kill was another 'I-18'.

JG 77's III. *Gruppe* were responsible for all 15 of that *Geschwader's* successes, Oberleutnant Kurt Ubben, *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 77, downing two of them – an I-16 and an Ilyushin DB-3 bomber. He too would go on to win the Oak Leaves, but unlike Dahl, he would not survive the war. Risen to the command of JG 2, Major Kurt Ubben was killed in action over France in the spring of 1944 (see *Osprey Aviation Elite 1 - Jagdgeschwader 2 'Richthofen'* for further details).

One of the main reasons for the widely diverging levels of claims for aerial victories submitted by the various *Jagdgruppen* on 22 June 1941 was that many of their number were employed primarily on ground-attack missions throughout the opening phases of *Barbarossa*. Although the Luftwaffe threw some 35 *Kampf-* and *Stukagruppen* into the initial strikes against the Soviet Air Force on the ground, so numerous – and so crowded – were Russia's airfields along her western borders that a substantial proportion of the German fighter force had to fly bombing missions too.

The weapon they were to use was the recently introduced SD-2 *Splitterbombe* (fragmentation bomb, also called the 'Butterfly' bomb). Weighing only 2 kg (4.4 lbs), this devilish little device, which could be fused to explode either on or before impact with the ground, had been developed as an anti-personnel weapon. But, if dropped in sufficient numbers, it could also do a lot of damage to rows of parked aircraft. And each Bf 109 could carry 96 *Splitterbomben*!



The SD-2 *Splitterbombe* in its fully-armed state. After release, the outer casing's two clamshell halves sprang open to form a kind of parachute to retard the bomb's fall. They in turn freed a pair of circular discs which acted as a wind vane as they rotated about, and moved up, the short steel cable. This action fused the bomb's 7.5-oz (212-gr) charge of TNT

Shuttling back and forth between their bases and the target airfields just beyond the frontier, the bomb-laden Bf 109s did indeed wreak considerable havoc. And although of short duration, such missions were not at all popular with the pilots who had to fly them.

Firstly, the four bulky panniers (arranged in two tandem pairs) from which the SD-2 were suspended had a marked effect on the Bf 109's performance and handling characteristics. Secondly, for maximum effect, the bombs had to be salvoed from an altitude of just 40 metres (130 ft), at which height Soviet small-arms fire was at its most vicious.

But, perhaps most alarming of all, the SD-2 had an unfortunate tendency to hang up. At any sort of speed – and, for obvious reasons, pilots did not dawdle when making low-level runs across an enemy airfield – the build-up of air pressure held the SD-2s in place in their racks; particularly the eight bombs of the two front rows.

It was only when the fighter slowed down – on approaching to land back at base, for example – that the last of any remaining bombs fell away. Numerous reports from this time note that incoming Bf 109s could often be distinguished by the trail of small explosions left in their wake. Worst still was the fact that some SD-2s did not release until the fighter was actually taxying in. A number of casualties were incurred.

It soon became standard practice for returning Bf 109s to make a low (but high-speed!) pass across their home fields to allow observers on the ground to confirm that their bomb racks were indeed empty. Only when they got the all-clear from below did the pilots then come in to land.

It is not known how many Soviet aircraft the Bf 109 fighter-bombers accounted for in such raids, but Russian losses on the ground far exceeded the number of machines shot down on 22 June. By the close of the day's operations it was estimated that the Red Air Force had lost 322 aircraft to fighters and flak, but that some 1500 had been destroyed on the ground.

Such was the magnitude of the enemy's losses that Hermann Göring at first refused to believe the reports of his pilots' successes. He ordered an

enquiry. Within days the advancing German army had overrun all 31 of the airfields which had been the targets of the Luftwaffe's pre-emptive opening strikes. This allowed examination of the wreckage, and showed that the initial reports submitted to the *Reichsmarschall* had, if anything, erred on the conservative side.

Even the official Soviet history of the Great Patriotic War – not a work noted for its objectivity – conceded that, 'By midday of 22 June our losses totalled approximately 1200 aircraft, including more than 800 machines destroyed on the ground'.

Against this the Luftwaffe recorded the loss of just 35 aircraft of all types. Casualties among the fighter arm were light, but included three unit leaders. Knight's Cross holder Hauptmann Heinz Bretnütz, *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 53, downed a Soviet SB-2 bomber, but was himself wounded. Forced-landing behind enemy lines, Bretnütz was hidden by friendly farmers, who tended his injuries as best they could until the arrival of the first German spearheads on 26 June. Despite an emergency operation to amputate a gangrenous leg, Heinz Bretnütz died in hospital the following day.

Grim as the fate of 'Pietsch' Bretnütz may have been, that of the other two was infinitely worse. Major Wolfgang Schellmann, *Kommodore* of JG 27, and Oberleutnant Willy Stange, *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 3, both came down behind Russian lines. The former was forced to take to his parachute when his *Emil* was damaged by debris from the I-16 he had just destroyed, whilst the latter crash-landed his *Friedrich* after being hit by flak. Both fell into the hands of Soviet troops and were killed.

The barbaric treatment meted out to downed flyers, particularly during the early stages of *Barbarossa*, was yet one more facet of the aerial war in the east which set it apart from all other European air campaigns. The threat of capture was never far from the minds of single-engined fighter pilots whenever they were required to fly deep into Soviet-held territory.

Although the Luftwaffe's initial strikes had inflicted enormous damage, the Red Air Force was by no means neutralised. As early as midday on 22 June penny-packet formations of Soviet medium bombers were beginning to hit back at the German invaders. Throughout the last week of June these attacks grew in strength and frequency, but they were ill-planned and lacked both cohesion and adequate fighter cover. Unlike the longer range bombers, much of the western districts' fighter strength had been deployed – and destroyed – on those frontier airfields targeted at the start of the campaign.

As each rigid formation of bombers approached, it was set upon by Luftwaffe fighters. Individual and unit scores began to escalate rapidly as old hands – *'alte Hasen'* ('old hares') in the vernacular of the *Jagdwaffe* – added to their already considerable numbers of western victories and newcomers, their names as yet unfamiliar, achieved their first kills.

On 23 June it was estimated that over 775 Soviet aircraft had been destroyed (again, many of them on the ground). But by the following day most of the action was aloft, with JG 51 being credited with no fewer than 57 'Martin' bombers shot down. Twenty-four hours later II./JG 27 and III./JG 53 each claimed 25 bombers apiece.

5./JG 27's Leutnant Gustav Langanke, whose sole victory to date had been a Hurricane downed in the London area the previous September,

Major Wolfgang Schellmann, *Geschwaderkommodore* of JG 27, was forced to take to his parachute over enemy territory on the opening day of *Barbarossa* and was reportedly shot by the NKVD 48 hours later

was alone responsible for the destruction of seven Tupolevs (but he would add nothing further to his total before being killed in action against South African Marylands over Libya some three months later).

At least three of III./JG 53's pilots claimed triple kills. Among Feldwebel Hermann Neuhoff's trio was an Ilyushin Il-2, one of the earliest examples of the Soviet Air Force's heavily-armoured *Stormovik* ground-attack aircraft to be brought down.

On that same 25 June II./JG 51 produced another 'instant ace' when Oberleutnant Hans Kolbow, the *Kapitän* of 5. *Staffel*, shot down five Russian bombers in a row – Kolbow already had 13 western kills to his credit. To this he would add another 14 in the east, including the five on 25 June, before being brought down by Soviet ground fire on 16 July. He was awarded a posthumous Knight's Cross 11 days later.

The most spectacular success of all came about on 30 June when the Red Air Force hurled hundreds of bombers against the central sector. Everything that could fly was sortied, including antiquated Tupolev TB-3 four-engined heavy bombers.

In reply, JG 51's three *Gruppen* put up 157 individual sorties. Sixty pilots returned to base with one or more victories, resulting in the *Geschwader* being credited with 113 kills in total! Among the total was JG 51's 1000th enemy aircraft destroyed since the outbreak of war. It was the first unit within the *Jagdwaffe* to reach this figure. Three pilots had claimed five kills apiece on this day.

Kommodore Werner Mölders' five took his personal score to 82, thereby surpassing the world record 80 victories set by the immortal 'Red Baron', Rittmeister Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen, in World War 1. The other two claimants were the *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./JG 51, Oak Leaves wearer Hauptmann Hermann-Friedrich Joppien, and a certain Leutnant Heinz 'Pritzl' Bär, who was to become one of the *Jagdwaffe's* true greats.

Several other members of JG 51, including Hauptleute Josef Fözö and Richard Leppla, the *Kommandeure* of II. and III. *Gruppe* respectively, took their scores to 20 or more during the course of the day's fighting. Hitherto the 'magic 20' had automatically brought with it the award of the Knight's Cross. But with the war in the east little more than a week old, a total of just 20 kills no longer guaranteed this coveted honour. So many Soviet aircraft were being shot down that more stringent requirements were already being applied to the winning of the award in order not to devalue it.

The damage being inflicted upon the Red Air Force was undoubtedly enormous. On 29 June the Luftwaffe had reported to the OKW (High Command of the Armed Forces) the destruction of 4017 aircraft on the ground and in the air. No longer the sceptic, *Reichsmarschall* Göring thereupon announced that, 'In the first week of the campaign the Luftwaffe has destroyed 4990 enemy aircraft for the loss of 179 of its own.'

The opening phase of *Barbarossa* was coming to an end. In the air the Luftwaffe had delivered its knockout blow to the Soviet Air Force. Although not mortal, it had succeeded in securing for the Germans mastery of the skies for the months ahead – long enough, it was confidently assumed by most, for the campaign to reach the 'speedy conclusion' demanded by Hitler.

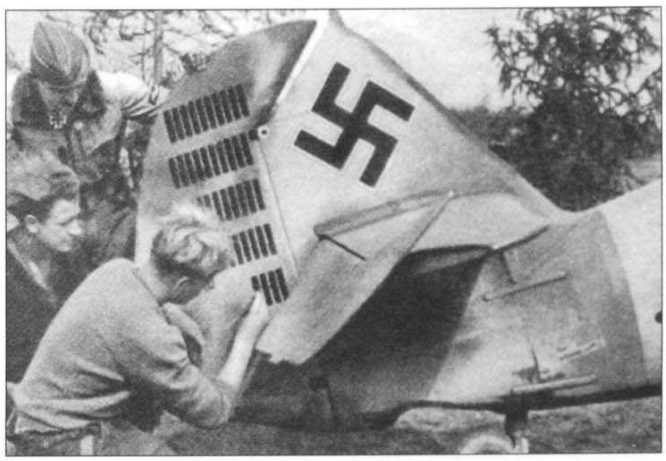
Bf 109s of JG 51 occupy a Russian airfield as the advance into the Soviet Union gets underway. Note the abandoned I-153s among the trees on the left

On the ground, too, the Russian frontier defences had been thoroughly breached. The way now lay open for the advance on Moscow, the key to victory in the east.

At the beginning of July the two armoured groups deployed along the central sector broke out of the Beresina bridgehead and began to push towards the Russian capital. They were supported by the Bf 109s of JG 51. With few Soviet fighters in evidence, the *Geschwader* was rarely called upon for bomber escort duties, instead flying mainly *freie Jagd* sweeps and ground-attack missions. At least one *Staffel* continued to operate in the fighter-bomber role against enemy airfields, but pilots no longer had to contend with the temperamental SD-2 *Splitterbomben*, their aircraft being equipped instead to carry four 50-kg bombs.

On 12 July Hauptmann Leppla claimed JG 51's 500th Soviet victim (which also proved to be the *Geschwader's* 1200th aerial victory of the war). But the pressure of the past three weeks' constant campaigning was beginning to tell. Although only six pilots had been killed or reported missing during that time, the three *Gruppen* had, between them, written off 89 Bf 109s – for which they had received just 49 replacements. The *Geschwader* was operating at less than half its normal establishment. And of those 58 fighters which were serviceable, 22 had engines with more than 50 hours' flying time which needed urgent overhaul.

One of Werner Mölders' earliest duties as *General der Jagdflieger* was to make a welcome return visit to III./JG 53, the *Gruppe* he had formed and first commanded in October 1939. The occasion was the award of the Knight's Cross to Leutnant Erich Schmidt on 23 July for his 30 victories (17 of them in the west). From left to right are Oberst Mölders, *Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Wilcke and Leutnant Schmidt



Just over a month later, on 27 August, and Schmidt (top left) watches the 44th kill bar being applied to the rudder of his *Friedrich*. Four days – and three victories – later still, Erich Schmidt would be reported missing, shot down by Soviet anti-aircraft fire near Dubno, in the Ukraine

Already a seasoned campaigner – his first kill had been a French Morane claimed on 14 March 1940, the famous 'Day of the Fighters' – Oberleutnant Franz *'Altvater'* ('Old Father') Götz of 9./JG 53 knew the value of grabbing 40 winks whenever the chance presented itself. He was another who would remain in frontline service until the very end of the war, by which time he had risen to become *Kommodore* of JG 26 in the west

Looking almost as relaxed as *'Altvater'* Götz, *'Fürst'* ('Prince') Wilcke enjoys a cigarette in the company of two of his *Gruppe's* leading *Experten*, namely Leutnants Herbert Schramm (left) and Erich Schmidt (right). Wilcke and Schramm were both awarded the Knight's Cross on 6 August

Despite such problems, JG 51 continued to take a toll of the Soviet Air Force. The *Kommodore's* century on 15 July was the cause for great celebration, and four days later Werner Mölders passed command of the *Geschwader* to Major Friedrich Beckh and departed to assume his duties as the Luftwaffe's first *General der Jagdflieger.*

Mölders' new post was no sinecure. It was clear that the *Jagdwaffe* was becoming dangerously overstretched. Already committed in western Europe and the Mediterranean, the German fighter arm was now waging war on three fronts. The very size of the new theatre, the huge distances to be covered and the vast areas to be controlled were simply too much for the number of fighters available.

As a consequence, July was to witness not only the first transfer of units from one part of the eastern front to another (such transfers would become increasingly frequent as the campaign wore on), but also the withdrawal of the first *Jagdgruppe* to meet the more 'pressing' operational demands of another theatre.

The latter was Hauptmann Wolfgang Lippert's II./JG 27. After just four weeks in the east, which had netted a total of 42 victories, II./JG 27 returned to Germany to re-equip with Bf 109Fs, before staging southwards to join I. *Gruppe* in Africa.

To make up for the departed II./JG 27, Hauptmann Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke's III./JG 53 was temporarily subordinated to *Stab* JG 27 (commanded since the disappearance of Wolfgang Schellmann by Major Bernhard Woldenga). Throughout the late summer and early autumn JG 27's three main component *Gruppen* (III./JG 27, II./JG 52 and III./JG 53) also supported the central sector armies' advance on Moscow.

By far the most successful of III./JG 27's pilots at this time was Oberleutnant Erbo Graf von Kageneck, the *Kapitän* of 9. *Staffel*, who added 48 eastern front victories to his previous tally of 17 western kills (and gained the Knight's Cross in the process) before both the *Geschwaderstab* and III./JG 27 withdrew from Russia in mid-October to fight alongside the unit's other two *Gruppen* in North Africa.

During the same period the attached III./JG 53 had claimed some 200 kills. The *Gruppe's* three leading scorers in the east were Oberleutnant Franz Götz, *Staffelkapitän* of 9./JG 53, with 23 victories, 7. *Staffel's* Oberfeldwebel Hermann Neuhoff with 21, and Hauptmann Wilcke with 20. Wilcke was awarded the Knight's Cross on 6 August for achieving 25 kills (the first 13 of them in the west), but both Götz and Neuhoff would have to wait until the following year, and the destruction of 40 enemy aircraft each, before they were similarly honoured.

One member of II./JG 52 also received the Knight's Cross at this juncture. Oberleutnant Johannes Steinhoff, *Kapitän* of 4. *Staffel*, had claimed 35 victories by the time of his award on 30 August. Destined to become one of the *Jagdwaffe's* most

A later photograph of Hauptmann Johannes *'Mäcki'* Steinhoff after his promotion to the command of II./JG 52 early in 1942. The lettering on the leading edge of the port wing specifies the largest permissible tyre size for this particular machine's mainwheels

respected unit leaders, 'Mäcki' Steinhoff would amass 148 kills on the eastern front. But there was another pilot within the *Gruppe* who would achieve more than double that total.

Leutnant Gerhard Barkhorn had already served with II./JG 52 for over a year by the time he finally shot down his first enemy aircraft on 2 July – this was his 120th mission! This solitary victory was in itself an unremarkable event, except for the fact that Barkhorn would go on to add exactly 300 more to become the second-highest scoring fighter pilot in history.

While existing scores were being added to, and new reputations being launched on the road to Moscow, other *Jagdgruppen* were achieving similar results on either flank of the German advance into the Soviet Union.

The sole *Jagdgeschwader* deployed on the northern sector was Major Hannes Trautloft's JG 54 (initially with 4. and 5. *Staffeln* of JG 53 attached). Its task was to provide aerial support during *Heeresgruppe Nord's* drive through the Baltic states towards the great Soviet naval base of Leningrad, Russia's second largest city and one-time capital.

The *Geschwader's* first major success came on 29 June when large formations of bombers attacked the Dvina bridges in an attempt to halt the Panzers' advance. By the end of the day JG 54 had downed 65 of their number, and on 18 July the *Geschwader* claimed its 500th Russian victim.

Twenty-four hours later another of the eastern front's true 'greats' opened his scoreboard when 9./JG 54's Leutnant Walter Nowotny destroyed a trio of I-153s over the Baltic island of Ösel. Nowotny's career

JG 54's advance through the Baltic states took them to Schaulen, (Siauliai) in Lithuania, where they found this motley collection of abandoned enemy aircraft. Among the usual assortment of I-16s, MiG-3s and SB-2s, note the ex-Lithuanian Air Force Gloster Gladiator fighters (background left) purchased from Great Britain before the war

almost ended there and then, however, for he was himself shot down during the engagement and only just survived three days and nights in a rubber dinghy.

Kommodore Hannes Trautloft's Knight's Cross, awarded on 27 July for 20 victories, was but the first of a number conferred upon members of JG 54 during the push on Leningrad. On 1 August JG 54 became the third *Jagdgeschwader* to achieve 1000 aerial victories since the outbreak of war – although widely separated and on different sectors of the front, JG 3's component *Gruppen* had achieved their collective 'thousandth' just the day before.

Already wearing the Knight's Cross, Oberleutnant Hans 'Fips' Philipp, *Staffelkapitän* of 4./JG 54, won the *Geschwader's* first Oak Leaves (for 62 victories) on 24 August. Less than a fortnight later the German army was at the gates of Leningrad. Early in September JG 54 took up residence on the Russian airfields at Siverskaya and Krasnogvardeisk, and these would remain their principal bases for much of the epic 900-day siege of Leningrad that was now about to begin.

The city, its naval installations, and the surrounding area were subjected to constant aerial bombardment. One of the first major raids was mounted on 9 September, when JG 54's fighters escorted Ju 87 dive-bombers of StG 2 against units of the Soviet Baltic Fleet. But the day was marred by the loss of Oberleutnant Hubert Mütherich, *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 54 and one of the recent Knight's Cross recipients, who was killed when his aircraft somersaulted while attempting a forced-landing. At the time of his death 'Hubs' Mütherich had a total of 43 victories, 33 of them claimed since the beginning of *Barbarossa*.

JG 54 was to lose another Knight's Cross wearer, of longer standing, on 30 September when the *Kommandeur* of III. *Gruppe*, Hauptmann Arnold Lignitz, shed a wing during a dogfight over Leningrad. Before the fighter spun in, Lignitz was able to take to his parachute. He was last seen drifting down over the centre of Leningrad, and reportedly died later in one of the city's gaols. This marked the start of a long war of attrition for JG 54 as the Soviets threw in more and more aerial reinforcements to defend their second city.

In contrast to JG 54's somewhat sedentary existence in the north, the campaign on the southern sector was one of speed and movement as the armoured units of *Panzergruppe* 1 took full advantage of the wide open expanse of the Ukrainian steppe to outmanoeuvre and encircle whole Russian armies. The two main fighter units supporting operations in the south were JGs 3 and 77.

From its jumping-off points south of Warsaw in occupied Poland, JG 3 covered the left-hand flank of the southern front (adjoining the central sector) which was the scene of the main armoured thrust towards the Ukrainian capital Kiev, and thence onwards to the great industrial centre of Kharkov. On their right, JG 77 set out from its fields in Bulgaria and Rumania in support of the ground forces' advances along the shores of the Black Sea towards the Crimea.

The most successful fighter pilot during the early months of the air war over southern Russia was the *Geschwaderkommodore* of JG 3, Major Günther Lützow. He alone was responsible for 83 of the *Stabsschwarm's* 106 victories between June and November 1941, this remarkable string

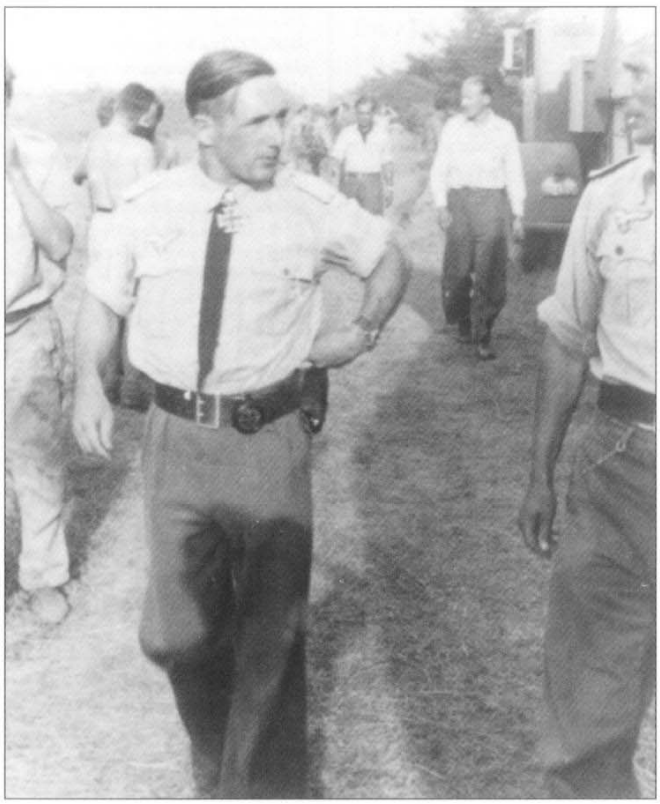
Oberleutnant Hans Philipp, who won JG 54's first Oak Leaves, would be killed in action in defence of the Reich late in 1943 when *Kommodore* of JG 1

of successes being marked by the award of the Oak Leaves on 20 July (for a total of 42 kills) and the Swords on 11 October (for 92). Exactly a fortnight later a trio of MiG-3s boosted his score to 101.

Günther Lützow thus became the second member of the *Jagdwaffe*, after Mölders, to achieve the century. He too received an immediate ban on all further operational flying, but this did not stop him from adding two more victories to his overall total – during 'involuntary encounters'(!) with Soviet fighters – before he finally relinquished command of JG 3 in August 1942 to join the staff of the *General der Jagdflieger*.

The Russian reaction along the southern front was similar to that on the central sector. After most of its fighter strength had been destroyed on the ground, the Red Air Force sent in waves of unescorted bombers in an effort to prevent a German break-out. They suffered appalling losses. In expressing his appreciation for the support provided by the Luftwaffe, the Chief of the Army High Command spoke of 'entire Russian bomber *Geschwader*, flying without fighter cover' being wiped out.

This is believed to have been a reference to the action of 8 July when JG 3 claimed the destruction of 38 twin-engined bombers. I. *Gruppe* was credited with 20 Ilyushin DB-3s, three of which fell to Oberleutnant Robert Olejnik. This brought the number of Olejnik's Russian victims to 25 since claiming the opening kill of *Barbarossa*. He would achieve half-a-dozen more – and receive the Knight's Cross while so doing – to emerge as I./JG 3's highest scorer before the *Gruppe's* return to the Reich at the end of September 1941, and subsequent redesignation as II./JG 1.



Also pictured wearing the Oak Leaves, awarded on 26 October for 85 victories, II./JG 3's Hauptmann Gordon Gollob subsequently commanded JG 77, before ending the war as the Luftwaffe's third and final *General der Jagdflieger*

Not too far behind 'Franzl' Lützow in respect of the number of Soviet aircraft destroyed during this period was Hauptmann Gordon Gollob, *Kommandeur* of II./JG 3. He had assumed command of the *Gruppe* on 27 June after the previous incumbent, Hauptmann Lothar Keller, had been killed in a mid-air collision.

An ex-*Zerstörer* pilot, and with six victories already to his credit, Gollob had added 79 Soviet aircraft to his tally by late October. This earned him both the Knight's Cross and the Oak Leaves. In November 1941 II./JG 3 was also withdrawn from the eastern front, but Major Gordon Gollob would reappear in the Soviet Union the following year as *Kommodore* of JG 77. Thereafter, he would serve in various staff positions before replacing the 'disgraced' Adolf Galland on 31 January 1945 as the third, and final, *General der Jagdflieger*.

Yet another high scorer during the opening phase of *Barbarossa* was the *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 3, Hauptmann Walter Oesau. A veteran of the *Condor Legion* who had since claimed 42 World War 2 victories to add to the eight Republican machines he had downed in Spain, he was already wearing the Oak Leaves prior to the invasion of Russia. In just five weeks over southern Russia 'Gulle' Oesau was credited with a further 44 enemy aircraft destroyed, his 80th kill of the war – a DB-3 bomber brought down on 15 July – bringing him the Swords to his Knight's Cross. But less than a fortnight later Walter Oesau relinquished command of II./JG 3 to take over as *Kommodore* of JG 2 in the west.

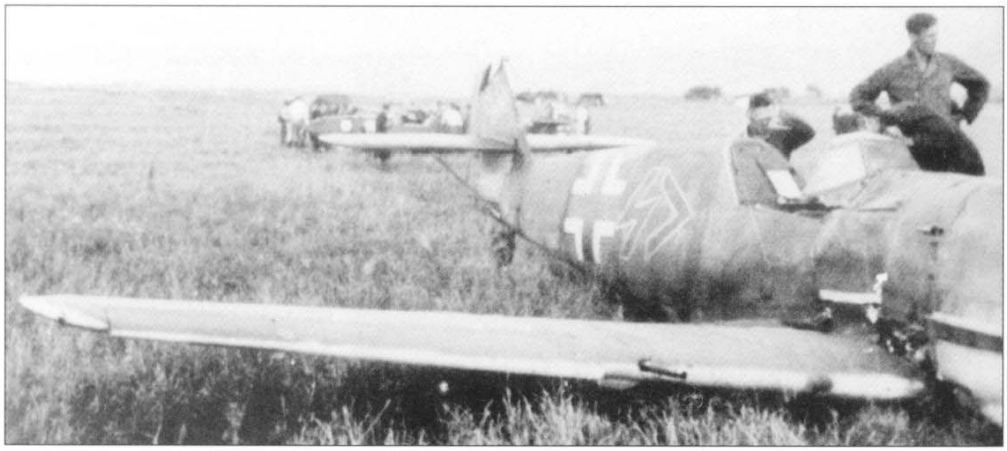
A number of other pilots were also scoring steadily as the ground forces advanced on Kharkov. At least six members of JG 3 were awarded the Knight's Cross during this period, and several of them went on to take their final totals close to the 100 mark.

In any other theatre, and in any other air force, an achievement of this kind would be considered outstanding. But such is the dominance of the 'select few' of eastern front aces within much post-war aviation literature that the names of numerical lesser lights such as Franz Beyer, Eberhard von Boremski and Walter Ohlrogge are now all but forgotten.

Much the same applies to JG 77, which was operating on JG 3's right flank. By the end of 1941 this *Geschwader* had a collective total of over 1000 Soviet aircraft destroyed, and five Knight's Crosses had been won as several later high-ranking and highly decorated *Experten* took their scores into double figures. The two most successful pilots of JG 77 during this period were Oberleutnants Kurt Ubben and Heinrich Setz, with 54 and 52 kills respectively. Both would subsequently be killed in action on the western front, Ubben as *Kommodore* of JG 2 and Setz as *Kommandeur* of I./JG 27.

Like the *Jagdgeschwader* to the north, JG 77 also inflicted grievous damage on unescorted Soviet bomber formations. Many multiple successes were achieved. On 25 June Oberleutnant Walter Hoeckner, *Staffelkapitän* of 6./JG 77, downed eight SB-2s during a *Freie Jagd* sweep. Eighteen of the following day's 47 kills were claimed by just four pilots, with Oberfeldwebel Reinhold Schmetzer, who was credited with five of the 32 SB-2s shot down on this date, then chalking up another five

This oddly-marked *Emil* was the mount of Oberleutnant Georg Schirmböck, the *Gruppen-TO* of II./JG 77. The symbol behind the chevron, which appears at first glance to be one half of the runic SS insignia, is in fact the emblem of the *'Jungvolk'*, a youth organisation to which *Schirmböck* presumably once belonged. He is reported to have adopted this marking after *Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Anton Mader complained that the *TO's* standard 'Chevron circle' was too similar to his own 'Double chevron'



As well as being the *General der Jagdflieger*, Werner Mölders also temporarily held the post of *Nahkampfführer Krim* (Close-support Leader Crimea). And it was no doubt in the latter role that he toured the Stuka units operating over the Crimea in the autumn of 1941. Here, he appears to be making a forceful point to Hauptmann Helmut Bode, *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./StG 77, while Leutnant Gawlina looks on

victories on 10 July. Half of Oberfeldwebel Eugen Wintergerst's 22 kills were also scored on just two days – four SB-2s on 9 August and seven SB-3s three days later.

These names may be unfamiliar, but there was one very well-known figure who would see brief action with JG 77 early in November, by which time the *Geschwader* was operating over the Crimea. In his dual capacity as *General der Jagdflieger* and temporary *Nahkampfführer Krim* (Close-support Leader Crimea), Oberst Werner Mölders was visiting JG 77 when he heard an NCO pilot complain of a botched attack on an Il-2.

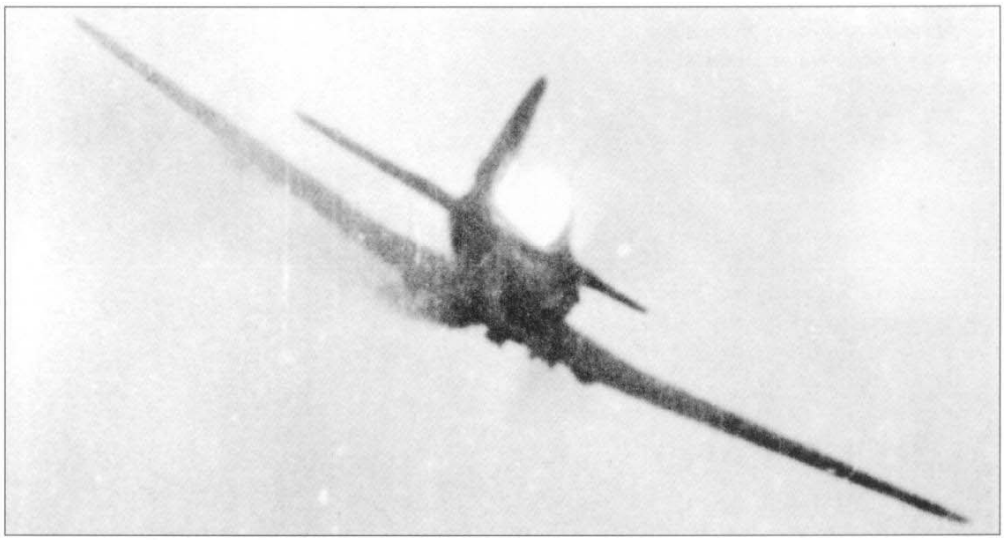
Ilyushin's heavily armoured ground-attack *Stormovik* was undoubtedly the hardest Soviet aircraft to bring down. Mölders took the Oberfeldwebel up the next day to demonstrate his technique;

'He positioned himself off to one side of – and some distance away from – the last Il-2 in a formation of six. He then turned in quickly and opened fire at the enemy's cockpit from an angle of some 30 degrees. The Il-2 immediately burst into flames and crashed. "Do you see how it's done?" Oberst Mölders voice came over the R/T. "Right, now you take the next one".

'I carried out the same manoeuvre and, sure enough, the next Il-2 went down on fire. "And again!" It was like being on a training flight. Another short burst and the third Il-2 was ablaze. The whole lesson had lasted no more than 12 minutes!'

It was a gesture typical of 'Vati' Mölders. Herbert Kaiser never forgot his 23rd and 24th kills. But because the *General der Jagdflieger* was officially banned from operational flying, the first *Stormovik* was never

But it was as a fighter tactician that Mölders excelled. One lesson he passed on was how to bring down the formidable *Stormovik* which, at this early stage of the war, was a single-seater machine with no rear-gunner. The spot to aim at was the unprotected top of the fuel tank immediately behind the cockpit – which is precisely where this early Il-2 has been hit. A fierce fire has already taken hold as the machine starts to go down



This *Friedrich* belongs to III./JG 52, which was the *Gruppe* responsible for guarding the Black Sea coastline during the opening phase of *Barbarossa*. Note the unusual angular '6' and the wavy bar *Gruppe* symbol, both applied in black to denote 8. *Staffel*

added to Mölders' list of victories – there has been much speculation as to how many other such 'demonstrations' went unrecorded!

Oddly, the one *Jagdgeschwader* perhaps associated more than any other with the eastern front, and certainly ultimately the most successful of all in terms of numbers of Soviet aircraft destroyed, made the least impact at the beginning of *Barbarossa*.

This was due entirely to the nature of JG 52's deployment. I. *Gruppe* was not even part of the invading order of battle, but was retained in the west to guard the North Sea coastline. And while Hauptmann Erich Woitke's II. *Gruppe* performed creditably enough on the central sector (claiming no less than 270 victories during its secondment to JG 27), III./JG 52's kill rate was so poor in comparison to all the other *Jagdgruppen* involved in the opening stages of the campaign in the east that Hermann Göring was moved to despatch the following telegram to the *Gruppenkommandeur* on 4 July;

'Your unit continues to distinguish itself by its failure to shoot down the enemy. Just how much longer are the Russians to be allowed into your airspace unhindered?

'Signed - Göring'

This was a perfect example of the *Reichsmarschall's* lack of understanding of the conditions at the front. He now accepted the huge claims of the other *Jagdgruppen* as the norm, and against these III./JG 52's figures were admittedly low. But Major Albert Blumensaat's unit was the southernmost *Gruppe* of the entire front. Its task was to patrol the Black Sea coast. Enemy incursions were few, and such raids as were mounted almost invariably approached undetected from across the sea, struck at some coastal or fringe target, and quickly escaped back over open water again.

Against hit-and-run tactics of this kind, which could be aimed at any point along a stretch of coastline over 200 miles (320 km) long, it is hardly surprising that the *Gruppe's* 35+ serviceable fighters fared badly in the scoring stakes. But when III./JG 52 was re-directed inland, its pilots soon began to make up for their slow start.

III./JG 52's first Knight's Cross was awarded to Feldwebel Gerhard Köppen of 7. *Staffel*. This early 1942 shot shows the 40th kill, which won Köppen the award, marked in black on a rudder now displaying a total of 62 victories – just ten short of the number which would earn him the Oak Leaves on 27 February. Köppen was posted missing after an engagement with Pe-2s over the Sea of Azov on 5 May. His final score stood at 85

During a Stuka-escort mission on 3 August Leutnant Hermann Graf scored the first kill of a career that would transform him into one of the *Jagdwaffe's* truly outstanding combat leaders. At this time Graf was a member of 9./JG 52. The skies above Kharkov were this *Staffel's* favourite hunting ground, and before its capture, the town's three main military airfields ensured that there was no lack of aerial opposition. By 11 October 9./JG 52's collective total had risen to 59, making it the most successful of the *Gruppe's* three *Staffeln*.

The others were not far behind. But on 28 November 8./JG 52 suffered a serious blow when *Staffelkapitän* Oberleutnant Günther Rall was seriously wounded after claiming his 36th kill. Temporarily paralysed, it would be nine months before Rall returned to his *Staffel*. He, too, was destined for great things. Despite being shot down five times, Günther Rall survived the war as the Luftwaffe's third-highest scoring fighter pilot.

A portent of things to come. The *Gruppen-TO* of II./JG 51 (note the *Gruppe* horizontal bar just visible behind the circle – see colour profile 16) casually brushes the first snow of the winter from the wing of his *Friedrich* at Vyazma in October 1941

The winter of 1941-42 quickly tightened its grip. This III. *Gruppe* machine, and the sentry alongside his tripod-mounted MG 34 machine gun, are fortunate to be well-muffled against the sub-zero temperatures

Soon the snow was so deep that hardstands had to be shovelled free. But there was no respite for the groundcrews, and here a pair of 'black men' refuel a winter-camouflaged III./JG 53 aircraft from individual drums

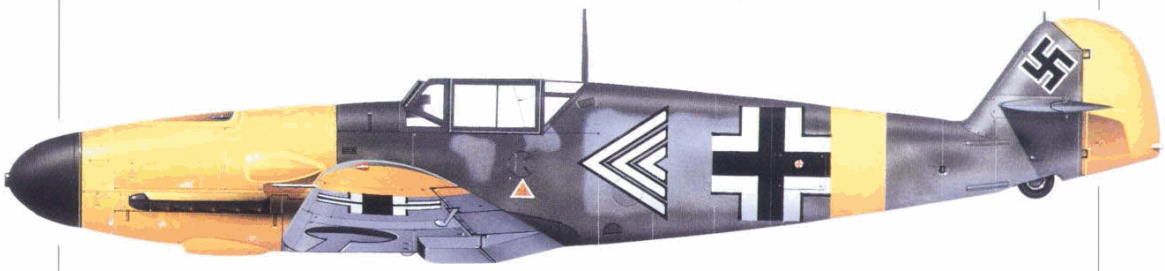
Yet it was a relatively unknown NCO, 7./JG 52's Feldwebel Gerhard Köppen, who was awarded the *Gruppe's* first Knight's Cross, for 40 victories, on 18 December.

By then, however, *Barbarossa* was in serious difficulties. The *Führer's* 'speedy victory' was to be denied him by that one implacable and impartial foe of any invader of Russia's vast open spaces – 'General Winter'. By mid-November autumn's mud had finally given way to snow and ice, and bone-chilling temperatures of -40 degrees descended over the frontlines. Totally unprepared for a winter campaign, and lacking proper clothing and specialised equipment, the Wehrmacht ground to a halt.

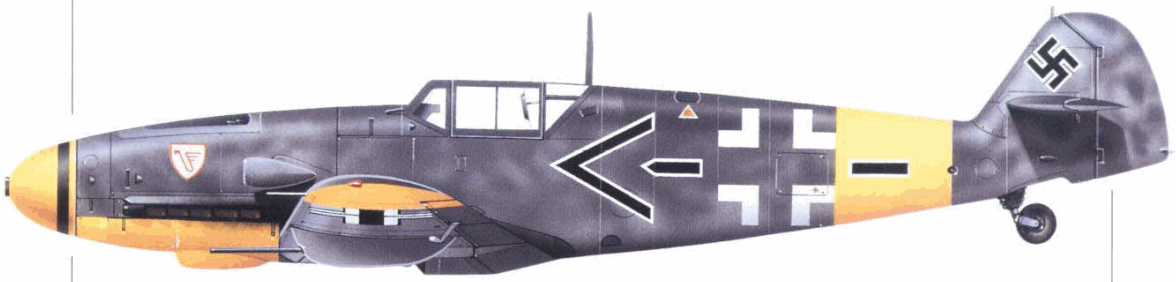
Taking full advantage of the Germans' immobility, fresh Soviet divisions that had been hastily brought in from Siberia launched a series of counter-attacks. The leading Panzers were soon pushed back from the approaches to Moscow, and German forces retreated and dug in for the winter. The late Werner Mölders' fears that the campaign in the east could be a long one had become grim reality.

Hangar space was at a premium, and those units lucky enough to be based on ex-Soviet airfields where hangars were still standing made use of every available inch of cover to carry out essential maintenance work

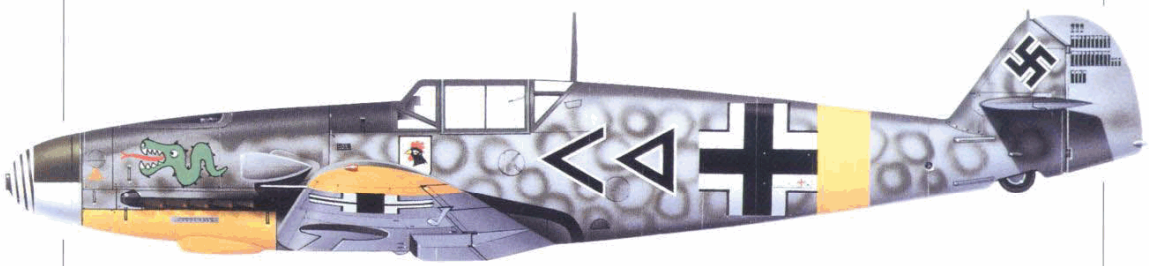
Colour Plates



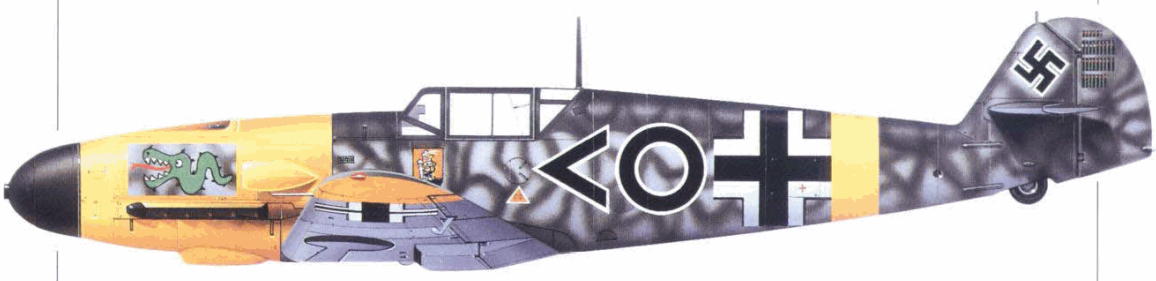
1
Bf 109F-2 'White Triple Chevron' of Major Günther Lützow, *Geschwaderkommodore* JG 3, Hostynne, June 1941



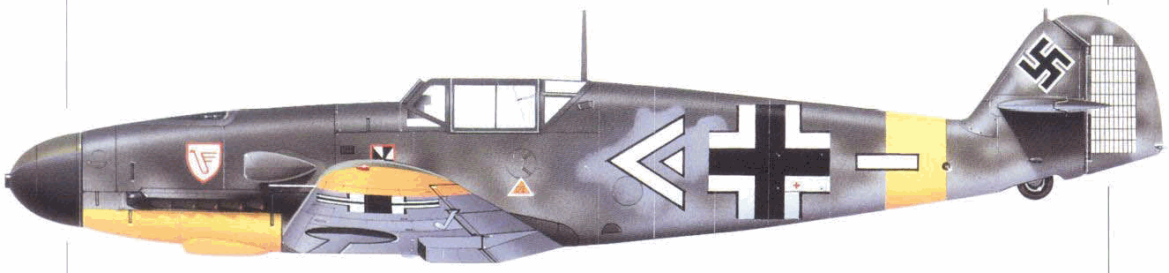
2
Bf 109G-2 'Black Chevron and Bars' of Major Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke, *Geschwaderkommodore* JG 3 'Udet', Morosovskaya, November 1942



3
Bf 109F-2 'Black Chevron and Triangle' of Hauptmann Hans von Hahn, *Gruppenkommandeur* I./JG 3, Luzk, July 1941

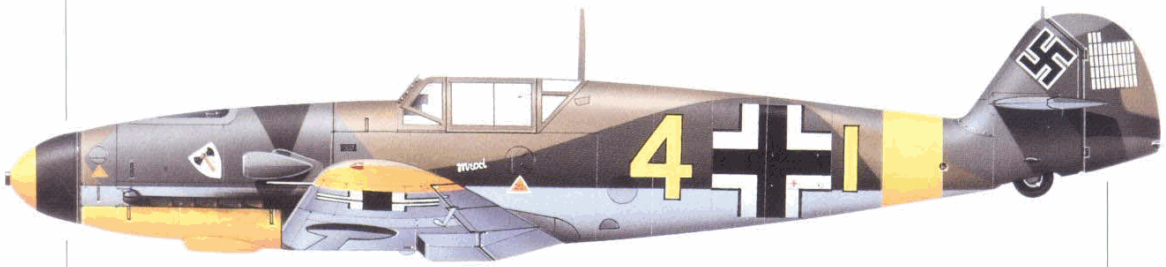


4
Bf 109F-2 'Black Chevron and Circle' of Leutnant Detlev Rohwer, *Gruppen-TO* I./JG 3, Byelaya-Zerkov, August 1941

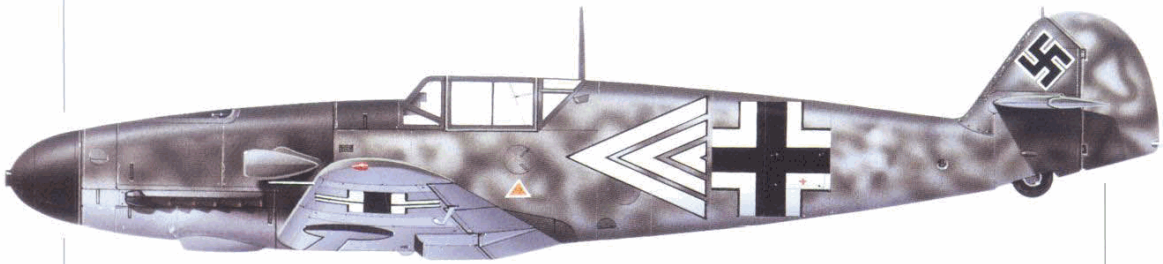


5
Bf 109F-4 'White Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Kurt Brändle, *Gruppenkommandeur* II./JG 3 'Udet', Tusow, August 1942

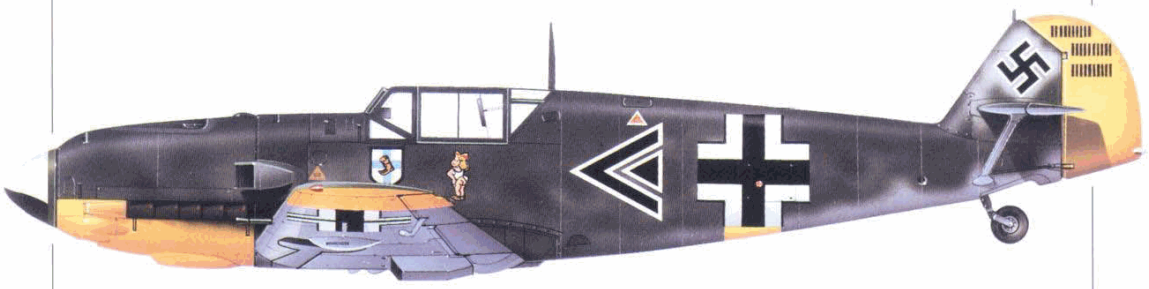
6
Bf 109F-4 'Yellow 7' of Oberleutnant Viktor Bauer, *Staffelkapitän* 9./JG 3 'Udet', Szolzy, March 1942



7
Bf 109F-4 'Yellow 4' of Oberfeldwebel Eberhard von Boremski, 9./JG 3 'Udet', Zhuguyev, May 1942

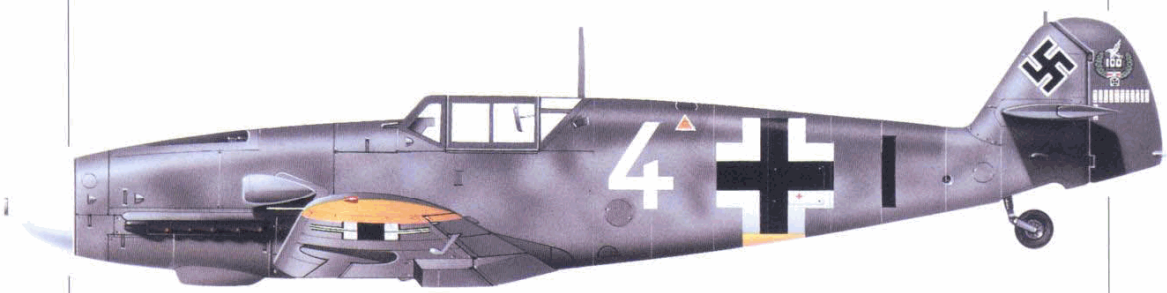


8
Bf 109F-4 'White Triple Chevron' of Hauptmann Franz Hahn, *Gruppenkommandeur* I./JG 4, Mizil/Rumania, January 1943

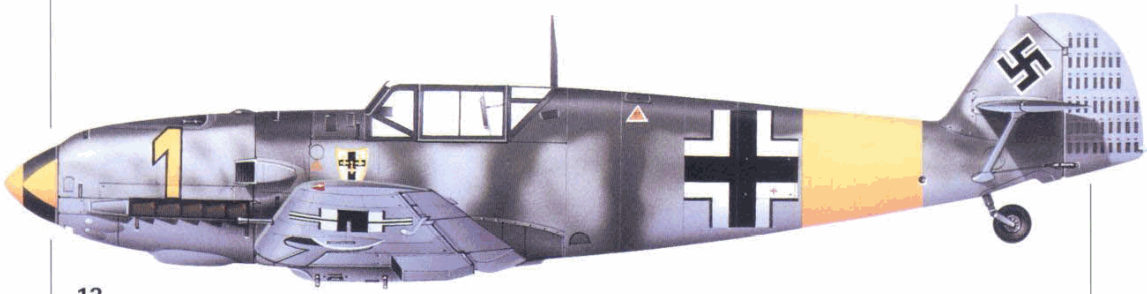


9
Bf 109E-7 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Günther Scholz, *Gruppenkommandeur* III./JG 5, Petsamo/Finland, September 1942

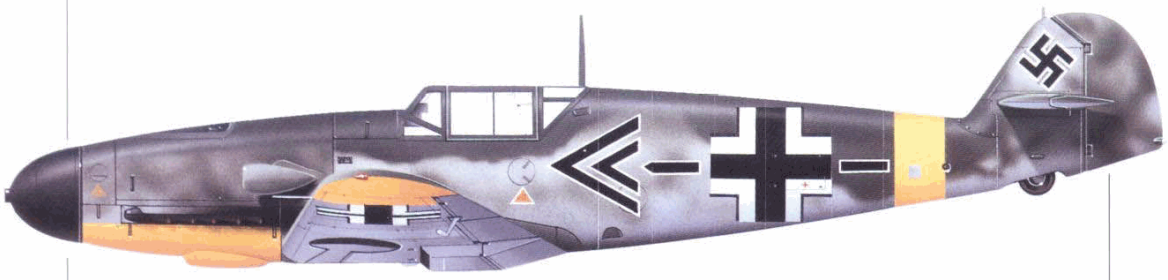
10
Bf 109G-2 'Yellow 12' of Oberleutnant Heinrich Ehrler, Staffelkapitän 6./JG 5, Petsamo/Finland, March 1943



11
Bf 109G-2 'White 4' of Oberleutnant Theodor Weissenberger, *Staffelkapitän* 7./JG 5, Petsamo/Finland, July 1943

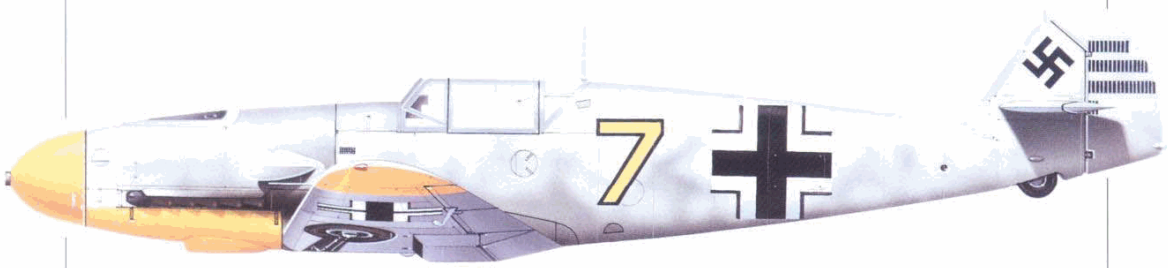


12
Bf 109E-7 'Yellow 1' of Oberleutnant Erbo Graf von Kageneck, *Staffelkapitän* 9./JG 27, Solzy, August 1941

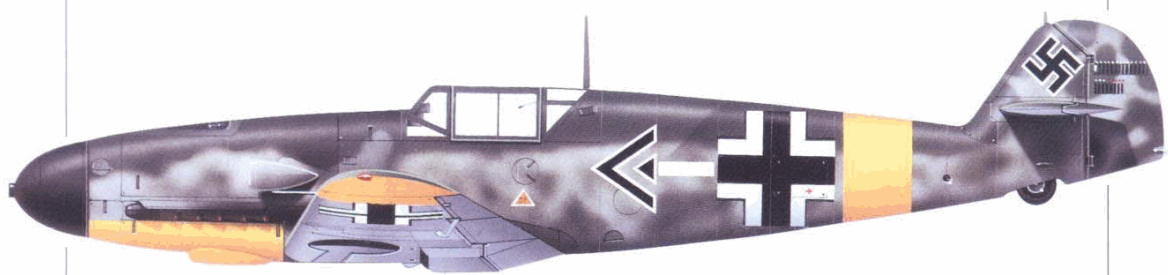


13
Bf 109F-4 'Black Chevron and Bars' of Major Karl-Gottfried Nordmann, *Geschwaderkommodore* JG 51 'Mölders', Shatalovka, Summer 1942

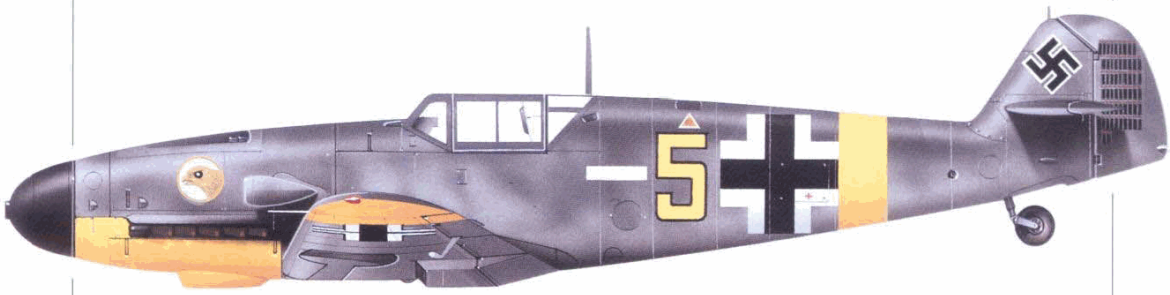
14
Bf 109G-6 'White 9' of Leutnant Günther Josten, 1./JG 51 'Mölders', Bobruisk, Spring 1944



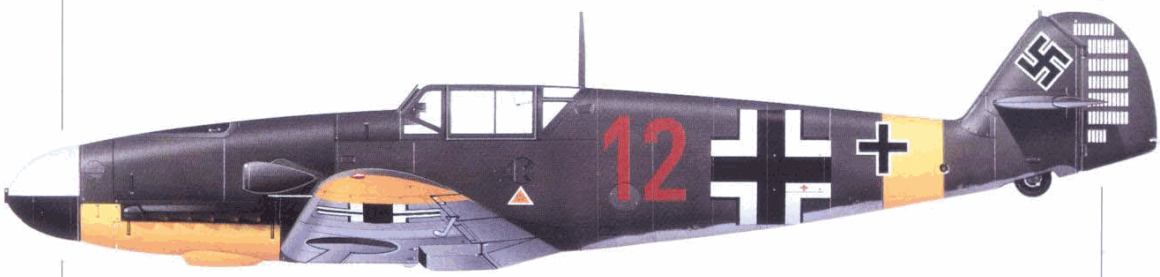
15
Bf 109F 'Yellow 7' of Oberleutnant Heinrich Krafft, *Staffelkapitän* 8./JG 51 'Mölders', Stolzy, March 1942



16
Bf 109F 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Josef Fözö, *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 51, Stara-Bychov, July 1941

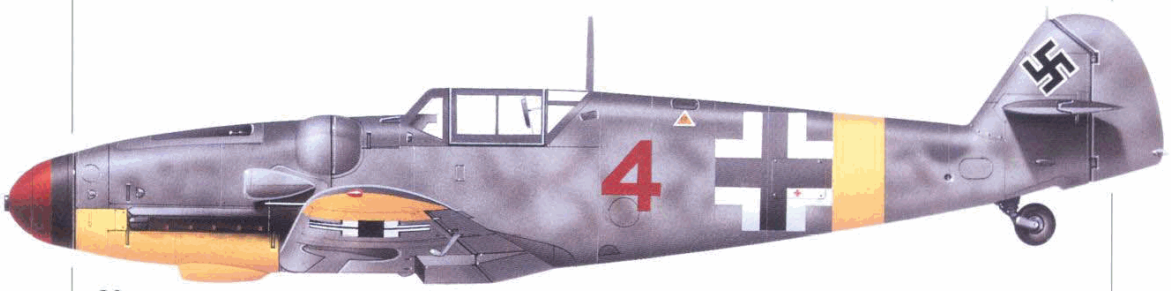


17
Bf 109G-2 'Yellow 5' of Feldwebel Anton Hafner, 6./JG 51 'Mölders', Orel-North, August 1942

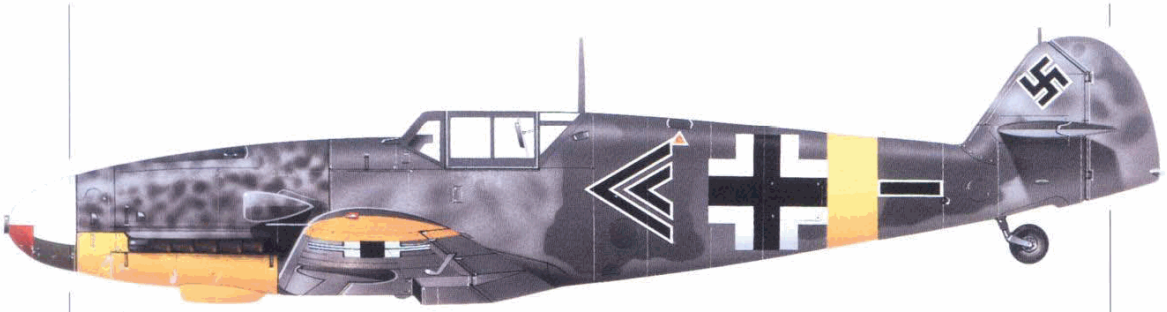


18
Bf 109F-4 'Red 12' of Oberfeldwebel Heinz Klöpper, 11./JG 51 'Mölders', Dugino, September 1942

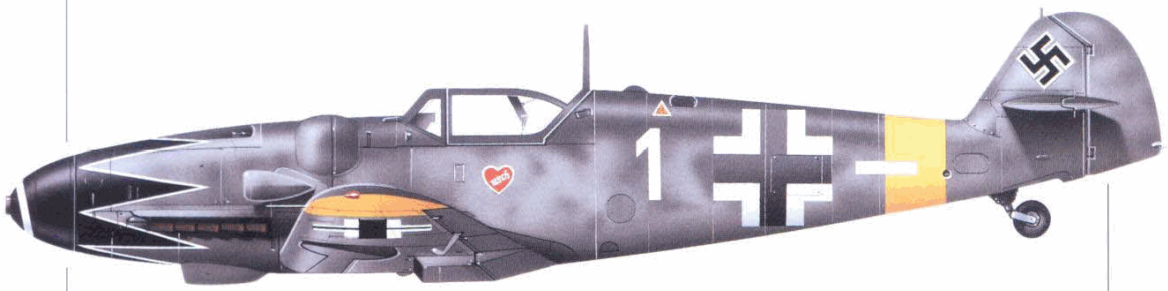
19
Bf 109G-6 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Gerhard Barkhorn, *Gruppenkommandeur* I./JG 52, Kharkov-South, August 1943



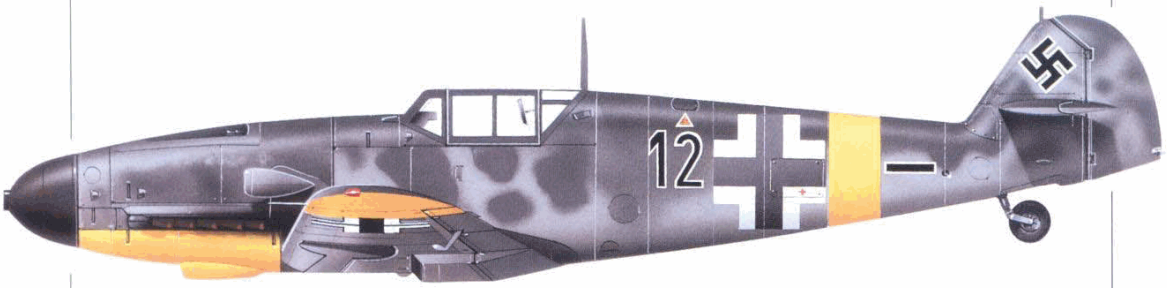
20
Bf 109G-6 'Red 4' of Oberfeldwebel Rudolf Trenkel, 2./JG 52, Poltava, July 1943



21
Bf 109G-2 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Johannes Steinhoff, *Gruppenkommandeur* II./JG 52, Rostov, August 1942

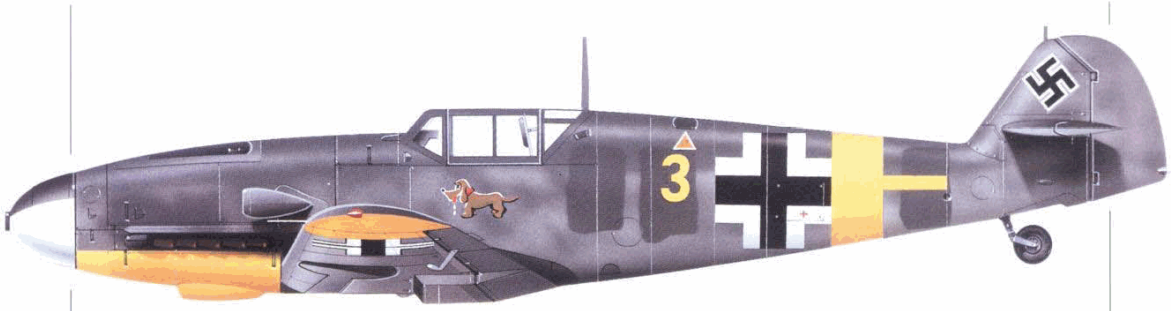


22
Bf 109G-6 'White 1' of Hauptmann Erich Hartmann, *Staffelkapitän* 4./JG 52, Budaörs/Hungary, November 1944



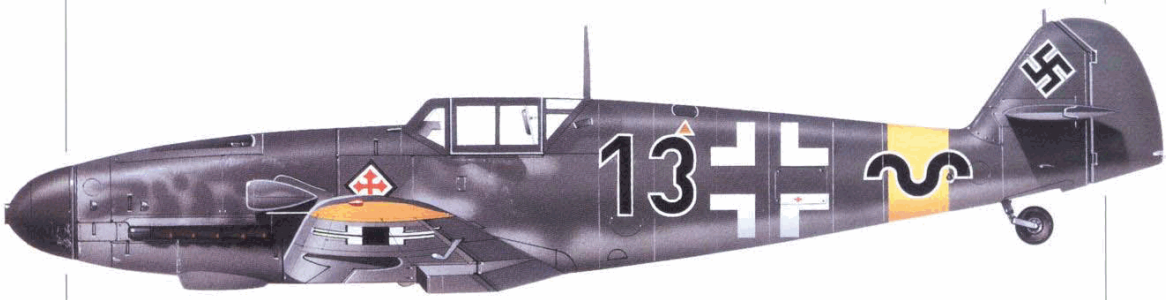
23
Bf 109G-4 'Black 12' of Leutnant Peter Düttmann, 5./JG 52, Anapa, May 1943

24
Bf 109G-2 'Yellow 5' of Leutnant Walter Krupinski, 6./JG 52, Armavir, August 1942

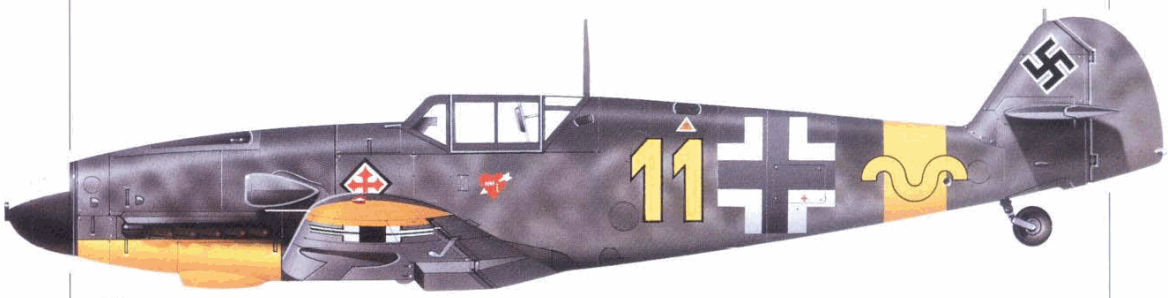


25
Bf 109G-4 'Yellow 3' of Unteroffizier Hans Waldmann, 6./JG 52, Anapa, June 1943

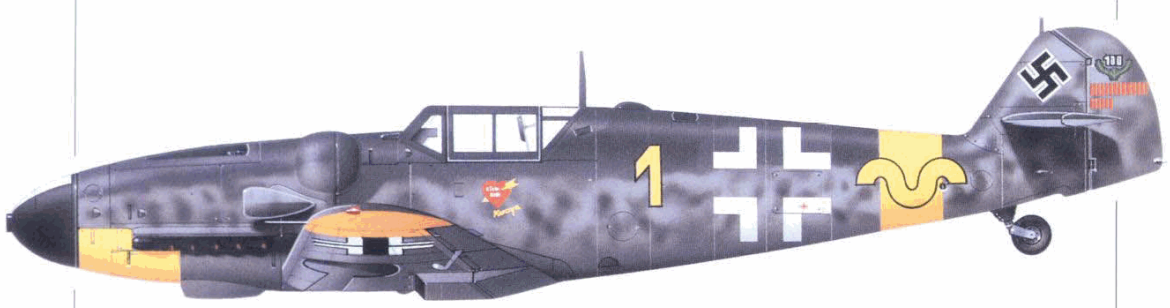
26
Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 3' of Leutnant Heinz Ewald, 6./JG 52, Zilistea/Rumania, June 1944



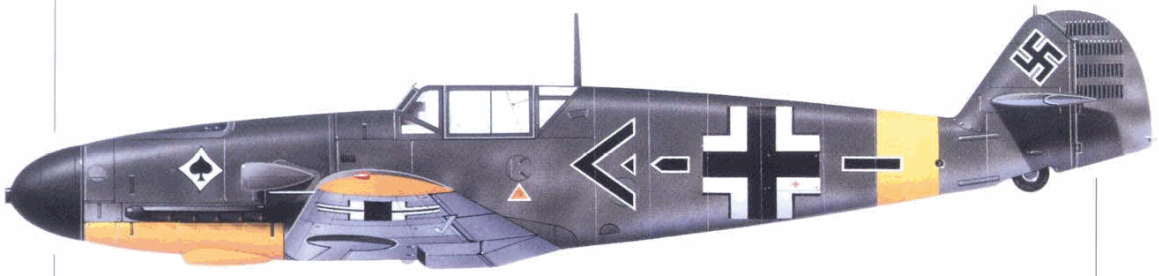
27
Bf 109G-2 'Black 13' of Oberleutnant Günther Rall, *Staffelkapitän* 8./JG 52, Gostanovka, August 1942



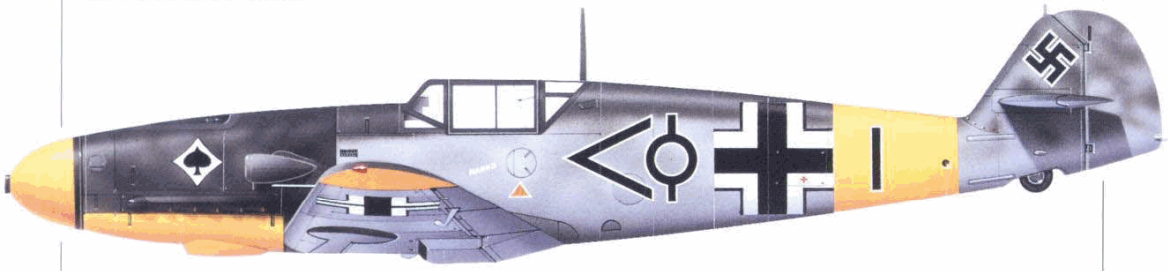
28
Bf 109G-2 'Yellow 11' of Oberleutnant Hermann Graf, *Staffelkapitän* 9./JG 52, Pitomnik, September 1942



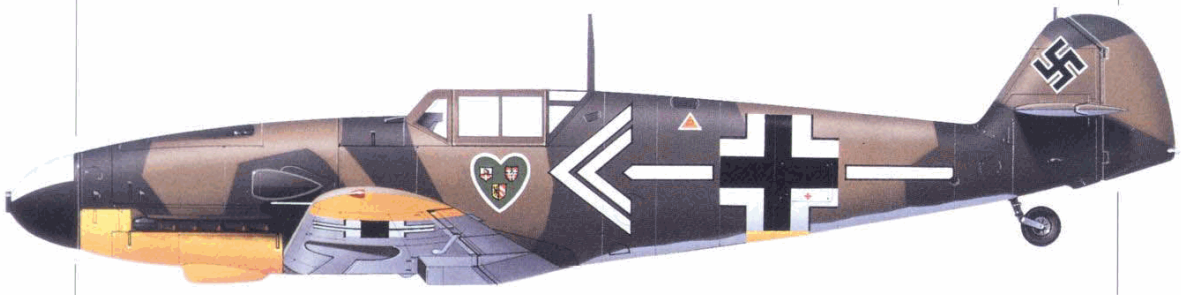
29
Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 1' of Leutnant Erich Hartmann, *Staffelkapitän* 9./JG 52, Novo-Zaporozhe, October 1943



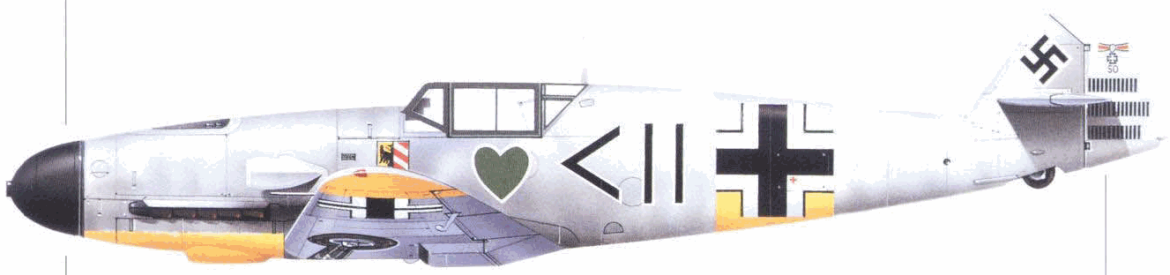
30
Bf 109F-2 'Black Chevron and Bars' of Major Günther Freiherr von Maltzahn, *Geschwaderkommodore* JG 53, Byelaya-Zerkov, July 1941



31
Bf 109F-2 'Black Chevron and Circle/Bar' of Leutnant Jürgen Harder, *Gruppenstab* III./JG 53, Sobolevo, June 1941

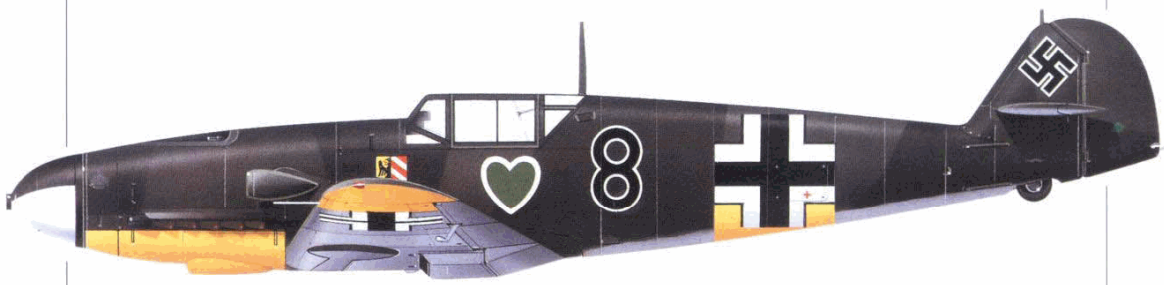


32
Bf 109G-2 'White Chevron and Bars' of Major Hannes Trautloft, *Geschwaderkommodore* JG 54, Siverskaya, Summer 1942

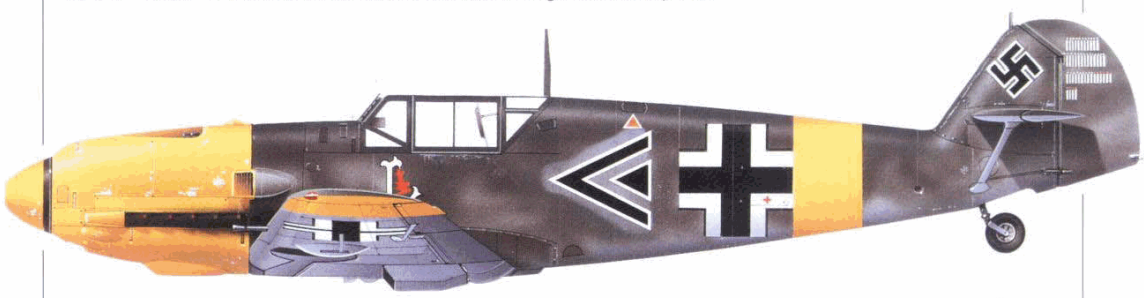


33
Bf 109F-2 'Black Chevron and Bars' of Hauptmann Hans Philipp, *Gruppenkommandeur* I./JG 54, Siverskaya, March 1942

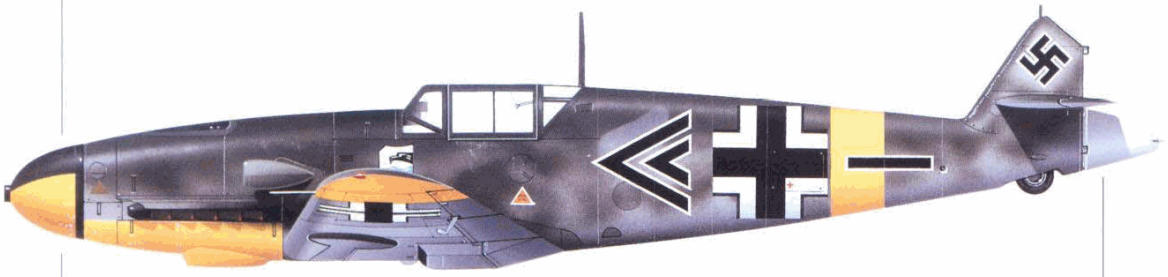
34
Bf 109F 'White 8' of Leutnant Walter Nowotny, 1./JG 54, Ryelbitzi, Summer 1942



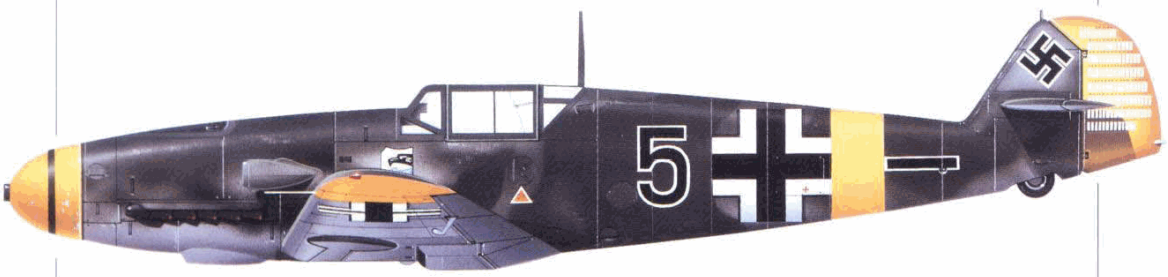
35
Bf 109F 'Black 8' of Feldwebel Otto Kittel, 2./JG 54, Krasnogvardeisk, May 1942



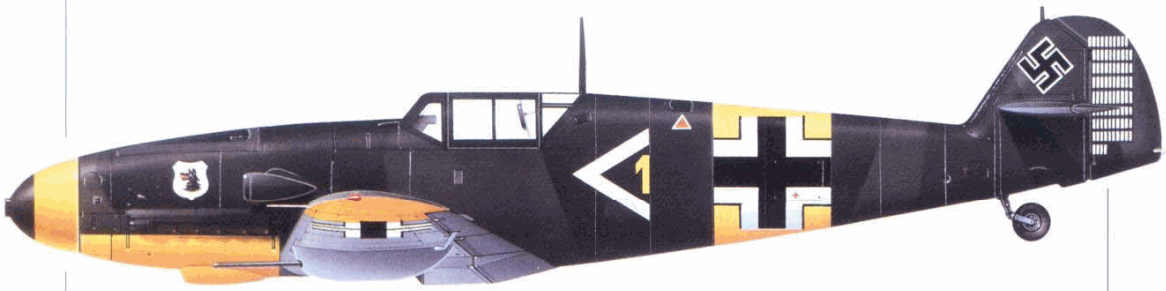
36
Bf 109E 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Herbert Ihlefeld, *Gruppenkommandeur* I.(J)/LG 2, Jassy/Rumania, July 1941



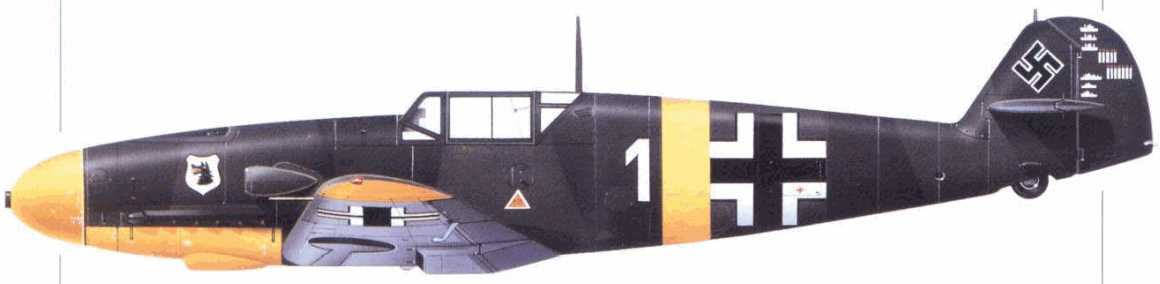
37
Bf 109F-4 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Anton Mader, *Gruppenkommandeur* II./JG 77, Stary Oskol, September 1942



38
Bf 109F-4 'Black 5' of Oberleutnant Anton Hackl, *Staffelkapitän* 5./JG 77, Kastornoje, September 1942



39
Bf 109G-2 'White Chevron/Yellow 1' of Hauptmann Kurt Ubben, *Gruppenkommandeur* III./JG 77, Lyuban, September 1942



40
Bf 109F 'White 1' of Oberleutnant Wolfdieter Huy, *Staffelkapitän* 7./JG 77, Lunga/Rumania, August 1941

THE ROAD TO DISASTER

The counter-attack on the outskirts of Moscow was not the only surprise the Soviets had in store for the ill-prepared German army. On 9 January 1942 Russian forces launched a second counter-offensive. This thrust was aimed at the boundary between the central and northern sectors. A breach some 60 miles (100 km) wide was soon driven between the two German fronts. This posed a serious threat to the rear of the German units encircling Leningrad to the north, who were now themselves in danger of being surrounded and cut off.

Much of JG 54's activity during 1942 was therefore governed by the twin needs to keep up their own pressure on beleaguered Leningrad while, at the same time, alleviating the Soviet pressure in the Lake Ilmen area at their backs.

In February alone, despite their now being outnumbered, the pilots of JG 54 claimed 201 kills for the loss of 18 of their own. Their successes were recognised by a clutch of awards. On 10 March Oberleutnant Max-Hellmuth Ostermann, *Staffelkapitän* of 7./JG 54, received the Oak Leaves for 62 victories, and two days later Hauptmann Hans Philipp, who had recently assumed command of I. *Gruppe*, became the first member of the *Geschwader* to be awarded the Swords (for 82 victories). On 31 March 'Fips' Philipp scored his century. But it fell to the relatively inexperienced Oberfeldwebel Rudolf Klemm of 8. *Staffel* to claim JG 54's 2000th kill of the war on 4 April.

It would take the *Geschwader* just over five months to add the next 1000 enemy aircraft to its collective scoreboard, although this figure was not achieved without cost. Among the summer's lengthening casualty lists was the *Kapitän* of 7. *Staffel*, Oberleutnant Max-Hellmuth Ostermann. Having been awarded the Swords on 17 May for reaching his century, he would add just two more to that total before falling victim to nine Soviet fighters over the Lake Ilmen front on 9 August.

Twenty-four hours later Hauptmann Karl Sattig, *Staffelkapitän* of 6./JG 54, was also brought down during a dogfight. Sattig was honoured with a posthumous Knight's Cross the following month. He had claimed 53 victories in the east, two of them by night.

The latter were the direct result of an initiative by the *Geschwaderkommodore* back at the beginning of the year. Hannes Trautloft had proposed that selected pilots should take off on bright moonlit nights and circle low over the snowy landscape of the Volkhov front north of Lake Ilmen ready to pounce on unwary Soviet bombers. These first nightfighter sorties of the war in the east soon began to pay dividends.

Between mid-January and the end of July 1942, JG 54 Bf 109s shot down 56 enemy aircraft during the hours of darkness. The most successful of the pilots taking part in Trautloft's 'experiment' was

Hauptmann Reinhard 'Seppl' Seiler, *Kommandeur* of III. *Gruppe*, whose final tally of 96 eastern front victories included 16 night kills during this period. Second came Oberleutnant Günther Fink with nine. But the greatest single achievement was that claimed by Leutnant Erwin Leykauf, for six of his eight nocturnal victories were Russian transports – all downed on the night of 22 June, and all in the space of just one hour!

By day the *Geschwader's* total of victories had continued to rise steadily despite the approach of autumn. Two recent Knight's Cross recipients, Leutnant Hans Beisswenger, *Staffelkapitän* of 6./JG 54, and Oberfeldwebel Max Stotz, had both gone on to double their scores in little more than four months to reach a century apiece. Each was awarded the Oak Leaves, Beisswenger on 30 September and Stotz exactly a month later.

On the other side of the coin there were those who were finding it more difficult to make their mark. Men such as Horst Ademeit, for example, who had joined JG 54 as an Unteroffizier in 1940, and then taken nearly two years to claim his first 20 kills. Another NCO pilot, Feldwebel Otto Kittel, had even fewer with just 15. Yet both these slow starters were also destined to achieve high scores.

In fact Beisswenger, Stotz, Ademeit and Kittel would all share a remarkably similar fate, joining the ranks of the eastern front's top scorers, each with a total of more than 150 Soviet aircraft destroyed, before they themselves were killed or posted missing. These events were to take place after JG 54 had converted to the Fw 190, however (see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 6 - Fw 190 Aces of the Russian Front* for further details).

The first *Staffeln* began to re-equip with the radial-engined Focke-Wulfs in February 1943, and almost as if to commemorate the passing of their trusty Bf 109s, Feldwebel Otto Kittel claimed JG 54's 4000th victory of the war on 19 February.

Forty-eight hours later II. *Gruppe* lost their *Kommandeur*. Major Hans Hahn – nicknamed 'Assi', and not to be confused with I./JG 3's Hans von Hahn – had been a long-time member of JG 2, and one of the Channel front's leading *Experten* with 68 western kills to his credit. He had moved east to take command of II./JG 54 on 1 November 1942 after the previous *Kommandeur*, Major Dieter Hrabak, had assumed the leadership of JG 52.

On 26 January 1943 Hans Hahn claimed his 100th victory (the same day, incidentally, that Max Stotz got his 150th). In just under a month he accounted for eight more Soviet aircraft, but then on 21 February engine failure brought him down behind enemy lines south of Lake Ilmen. A popular figure known throughout the *Jagdwaffe* for his natural ebullience, 'Assi' Hahn also possessed great inner strength, as he was to demonstrate during seven long years of Soviet captivity.

On the central sector during the early weeks of 1942 JG 51 had likewise to focus its attentions and energies in two different directions – towards the Soviets pushing westwards from Moscow, and against the counter-offensive simultaneously threatening *Heeresgruppe Mitte's* left flank.

The reappearance in numbers of the Red Air Force afforded JG 51's pilots ample opportunity to add to their growing scores. This in turn led to a number of decorations. Among the first of these was the Swords awarded to Hauptmann Heinz Bär on 16 February for 90 victories. 'Pritzl' Bär was another of the *Jagdwaffe's* true characters. He had been

Wearing his recently-awarded *Swords, Heinz 'Pritzl' Bär (in peaked cap)* poses with three of I./JG 51's then leading *Experten*. They are, from left to right, Leutnant Heinrich Höfemeier (96 victories, killed in action on 7 August 1943), Leutnant Erwin Fleig (66 victories, PoW on 29 May 1942), Bär and Oberleutnant Heinrich Krafft (78 victories, missing in action on 14 December 1942)

Staffelkapitän of 12./JG 51 since July 1941. Subsequently serving as *Kommodore* of both JGs 1 and 3, he ended the war flying the Me 262 jet (see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 17 - German Jet Aces of World War 2* for further details). His final total of 220 kills included 96 claimed during his time on the eastern front.

On 18 March Oberleutnant Heinrich Krafft and Leutnant Hans Strelow both received the Knight's Cross, for 46 and 52 victories respectively. Six days (and 14 kills) later, Strelow was awarded the Oak Leaves. Just two days short of his 20th birthday, Hans Strelow was then the youngest wearer of the Oak Leaves in the entire *Wehrmacht*, but before the year was out both Krafft and Strelow had forced-landed behind enemy lines. 'Gaudi' Krafft was beaten to death by Russian soldiers, and Hans Strelow reportedly shot himself rather than suffer the same fate.

'Gaudi' (literally 'Fun and games') Krafft – seen in the photograph at the top of this page – had won his Knight's Cross on 18 March 1942. On the same day 5. *Staffel's* Leutnant Hans Strelow (right) had also been presented with the award during a visit to Bryansk by the new *General der Jagdflieger*, Adolf Galland. The latter appears to be taking no chances with the still bitter Russian winter! Strelow and Krafft shared a similar fate. Both would perish – albeit under very different circumstances – after forced-landing behind Soviet lines

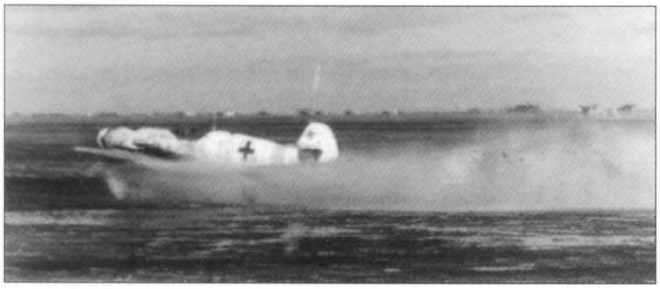
On 9 April Oberstleutnant Friedrich Beckh, who had succeeded Werner Mölders as *Kommodore* of JG 51, was promoted to a staff position in the RLM. 'Vati' Mölders would have been a difficult act for any commanding officer to follow, but Beckh was a distant and not particularly popular figure. Indeed, a number of pilots apparently did not even know that he had joined the *Geschwaderstab* back in 1940, believing he had been brought in from outside to take over JG 51!

Beckh's successor, the erstwhile *Kommandeur* of IV. *Gruppe*, was an entirely different type. Already sporting the Oak Leaves, Major Karl-Gottfried Nordmann soon stamped his personality on the *Geschwader*. One of the measures he took was to release 2./JG 51 from its predominantly fighter-bomber role – this *Staffel* had been flying mainly *Jabo* sorties since the beginning of *Barbarossa*.

Relieved of this chore, its pilots' scores rose dramatically, and none more so than that of Oberfeldwebel Joachim Brendel. Having been credited with his first kill in the early days of the campaign in the east, Brendel took a further nine months to claim a second. By war's end Hauptmann Joachim Brendel, *Kommandeur* of III./JG 51, and winner of the Knight's Cross and Oak Leaves, had emerged as the *Geschwader's* highest scorer on the eastern front with 189 Soviet aircraft destroyed – including over 90 heavily-armoured Ilyushin *Stormoviks*.

Despite there being something of a lull over JG 51's areas of operations during April and May, the *Geschwader* still suffered a number of

Judging by the guilty smile, Major Karl-Gottfried Nordmann, *Kommodore* of JG 51 'Mölders', is seen here carrying out a well-known pre-op ritual. But has he really been caught on camera in the act of watering the tailwheel – or is that small puddle behind the object in question the last vestige of winter's snow?



Little doubt here that this is the spring thaw proper as a Bf 109, still in winter camouflage, mushes its way across a waterlogged field

Mother Russia is nothing if not resilient and by the summer of 1942 the Luftwaffe's airfields were once again a riot of colour as the wild flowers bloomed. 7./JG 51's 'White 10' enjoys the lull before the coming storm

casualties. On 29 May – exactly a week after the disappearance of Hans Strelow – Leutnant Erwin Fleig, *Staffelkapitän* of 2./JG 51 and 66-victory *Experte*, bailed out over enemy territory and was taken prisoner.

Forty-eight hours later another Knight's Cross holder was lost when the *Kommandeur* of II. *Gruppe*, Hauptmann Josef Fözö, was badly injured in a take-off accident. Ex-Austrian air force and a *Condor Legion* veteran, Fözö would not return to combat flying. Earlier in May Oberleutnant Bernd Gallowitsch, who had since added 22 more kills to the 42 which had earned him the Knight's Cross on 24 February, had also been seriously injured. Unlike Fözö, he would return to operations, flying the He 162 with JG 1 during the final weeks of the war.

Pictured here as an Unteroffizier at the time of the award of his Knight's Cross (for 42 kills) back in October 1941 – hence the fetching fur headgear – Oberfeldwebel Franz-Josef Beerenbrock was the first member of JG 51 to surpass Mölders' century

Hauptmann Richard Leppla, *Kommandeur* of III./JG 51, was severely wounded in combat on 2 August 1942. Despite losing the vision in one eye, he endeavoured to remain operational, only to collide with a landing Ju 52 five days later. After hospitalisation, Leppla commanded various training units before being appointed *Kommodore* of JG 6 in mid-April 1945

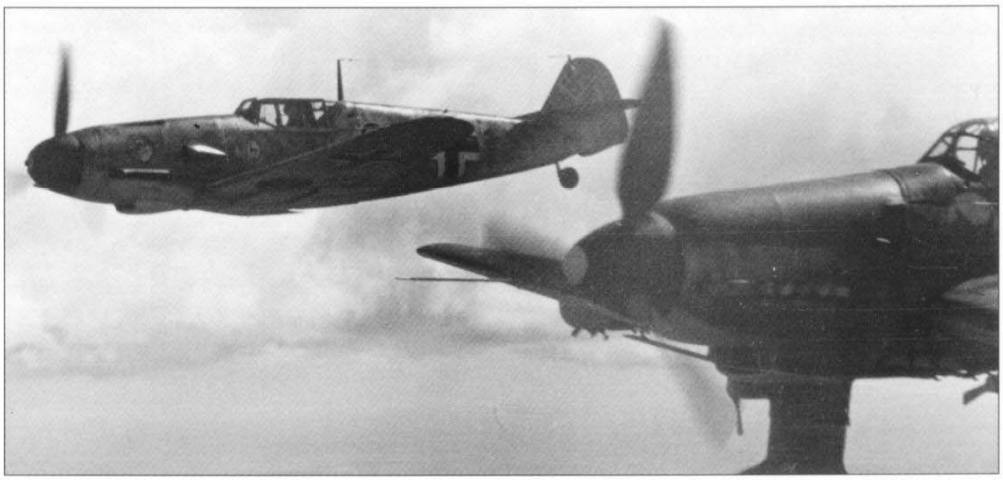
In July the skies over the central sector flared into life again as the Soviets prepared for a new offensive. For a brief period the *Geschwader's* scoring rate rose to a level approaching that enjoyed in the opening phases of *Barbarossa*.

On 5 July Hauptmann Hartmann Grasser's II./JG 51 claimed 46 victories, the *Kommandeur* himself being credited with eight of them. Two of his pilots, Oberleutnant Karl-Heinz Schnell and Feldwebel Anton Hafner, accounted for seven each. The latter pilot was awarded the Knight's Cross on 23 August, for 60 kills, and would subsequently become JG 51's highest scorer of all with a total of 204 enemy aircraft destroyed before being killed in action in 1944.

On 2 August Oberfeldwebel Franz-Josef Beerenbrock of IV./JG 51 downed nine Soviet aircraft, taking his score to 102. He thus became the first pilot within the *Geschwader* to surpass Werner Mölders' century, and it earned him the Oak Leaves the following day.

But losses were continuing to rise too. Among August's 16 casualties were Hauptmann Richard Leppla, *Kommandeur* of III. *Gruppe*, who was seriously wounded (but who would return to frontline service for the last three weeks of the war as *Kommodore* of JG 6), and three *Staffelkapitäne*.

A Ju 87D of StG 2 'Immelmann' enjoys a close escort from one of I./JG 51's *Friedrichs* during the late summer of 1942 shortly before the *Gruppe* began to re-equip with the Fw 190



In the far north the new JG 5 was also tasked with Stuka escort duties. A solitary Bf 109 waits in the foreground as a *Staffel* of Ju 87s run up their engines preparatory to a massed take-off

The introduction into service of upgraded versions of the 'new generation' Soviet fighters, and the employment of improved tactics by their pilots, were beginning to erode the *Jagdwaffe's* hitherto undisputed superiority. But JG 51 was also about to receive new aircraft. Early in September I./JG 51 was withdrawn from the front to begin conversion on to the Fw 190. Other *Gruppen* followed in short order.

The Messerschmitt Bf 109 may have been disappearing from the ranks of JGs 51 and 54 on the central and northern sectors, but elsewhere on the eastern front it was still the mainstay of the German fighter force.

Early in 1942 a completely new *Jagdgeschwader* was formed in the far north. Made up of previously autonomous *Gruppen*, JG 5 was somewhat unusual in that it was deployed to combat both western and eastern opponents. While two of its *Gruppen* were stationed in central and southern Norway to guard against RAF incursions from across the North Sea, II. and III./JG 5 were based in northern Norway and Finland facing the Soviet Air Force.

Operating astride and above the Arctic Circle, the pilots of the two latter *Gruppen* fought an isolated, almost self-contained war. Their tasks included bomber- and Stuka-escort missions against the Russian port of Murmansk and the strategically vital railway line linking it to the south, as well as the defence of the Wehrmacht's own northernmost bases and lines of supply.

Heavily outnumbered from the outset, JG 5 nevertheless produced some of the highest scorers of the eastern front. Foremost amongst them was Leutnant, later Major, Heinrich Ehrler.

JG 5 had their own ideas about suitable camouflage for the Arctic theatre. This *Friedrich* of IV. *Gruppe* (note the small solid circle behind the fuselage cross) displays a favourite scheme consisting of a light wave-mirror 'scribble' over all upper surfaces

Arctic *Experte* Oberleutnant Walter Schuck of 7./JG 5 returns to Petsamo, zooming in low, wings waggling, to indicate to those watching below that he has just claimed another victory to add to his lengthening list of kills

Third in JG 5's trio of top scorers was ex-*Zerstörer* pilot Oberleutnant Theodor Weissenberger, *Kapitän* of 7. *Staffel*, who is pictured here wearing the Oak Leaves awarded on 2 August 1943 for 112 enemy aircraft destroyed . . .

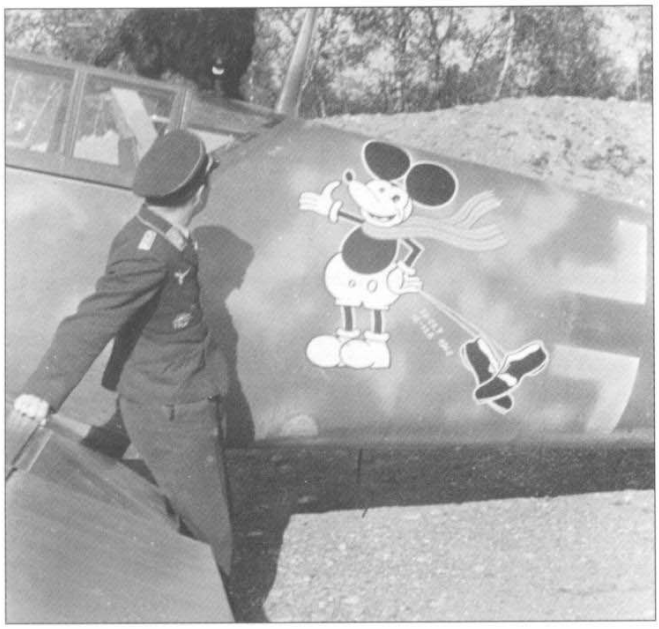
Initially a member of the flak arm, Ehrler retrained as a fighter pilot in 1940. Rising through the ranks of JG 5, he commanded both the highly successful 6. *Staffel*, and then III. *Gruppe*, before being appointed *Geschwaderkommodore* in May 1944. References quoting his final tally of kills vary between 200 and 220. Despite having been awarded the Oak Leaves – on 2 August 1943 for 112 victories – and being nominated for the Swords, Major Ehrler left JG 5 under something of a cloud after being held officially responsible for the Luftwaffe's failure to protect the battleship *Tirpitz* from the RAF bombing raid which sank her in Norway's Tromsö Fjord on 12 November 1944.

Although sentenced by court-martial to three years' imprisonment (to commence after the 'final victory'), Heinrich Ehrler retrained yet again, this time on to the Me 262 jet fighter. Serving with JG 7, he was killed in action on 6 April 1945 – by deliberately ramming a B-17, according to some reports.

Two other Oak Leaves winners from JG 5 went on to fly the Me 262 with JG 7. Oberleutnant Walter Schuck's eastern front total fell just two short of 200, while Hauptmann Theodor Weissenberger claimed 175

. . . and a close-up of the rudder of Weissenberger's *Gustav* when his score had risen to 131 (a minor mystery here – a record of Weissenberger's victories lists kill no 131 as the second of a trio of Yak-9s all downed within the space of three minutes south of Luga on the afternoon of 16 February 1944, so why not 132 kill bars?). Compare this machine's camouflage scheme and elaborate rudder decoration with his earlier G-2 depicted in colour profile 11

Although not a high scorer himself (his final tally was 56), Oberleutnant – later Major – Horst Carganico was another of the *Jagdwaffe's* natural leaders. He commanded, in turn, the original *Jagdstaffel* Kirkenes (ex-1./JG 77, later 1./JGrzbV), 6./JG 5 and then II. and I./JG 5. Revealing a closer affinity to the art of Walt Disney, rather than the designs of ancient heraldry, his cowling is here embellished with a miniature Mickey Mouse . . .



. . . which was later to grow somewhat in size! The extra pair of shoes, and the dates close alongside (22-23 July and 12-13 August 1942), refer to occasions when Carganico forced-landed and had to return to base on foot. His pet scottie, perched on the cockpit roof, had provided the inspiration for an earlier personal emblem when he was *Kapitän* of 1./JG 77. Major Carganico was killed in France on D-Day +10

Soviet aircraft, latterly as *Kommandeur* of II./JG 5, before assuming command of I. *Gruppe* in the west immediately prior to D-Day. Unlike Ehrler, both Schuck and Weissenberger survived the war. Coincidentally, each was credited with eight jet victories while serving with JG 7.

More than a dozen members of JG 5 received the Knight's Cross. Although not the first to be so honoured, Feldwebel Rudolf 'Rudi' Müller emerged as one of the *Geschwader's* first true *'Experten'*, downing five Red Air Force Hurricanes over the Kola Inlet on 23 April 1942. Twelve months later, almost to the day, he was himself shot down in the same area – by then his score stood at 94. Forced-landing on a frozen lake close to Murmansk, Rudolf Müller died in post-war Soviet captivity.

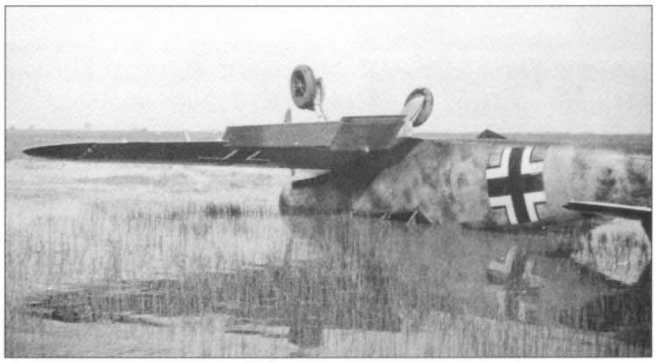
Like Müller, Oberfeldwebel Jakob Norz was another high-scoring NCO belonging to 6. *Staffel*. His final total of 117 included 12 Soviet aircraft downed in a single day. Later commissioned, Leutnant 'Jockel' Norz lost his life when he crashed in northern Norway following engine failure.

Spectacular as some of these individual Arctic successes undoubtedly were, the main focus of attention in 1942 was fixed on the southern sector of the front. This was to be the scene of the Wehrmacht's major summer offensive. *Fall Blau* (*Case Blue*) was launched on 28 June along a front stretching some 500 miles (800 km) from Kursk down to the Sea of Azov. Its initial objectives were quickly reached, and within days Hitler had expanded *Blau* into *Braunschweig* (*Brunswick*).

This new, more ambitious operation had twin aims – the seizure of both Stalingrad, an important industrial and communications centre on the River Volga, and the rich oilfields of the Caucasus. This meant, however, that the two armies involved had to proceed along dangerously diverging lines of advance until, finally, a yawning 185-mile (300-km) gap had opened up between 6. *Armee* in Stalingrad and 17. *Armee* on the Caucasus front. Furthermore, for the first time since the campaign in Poland, the German ground forces were lacking the one essential ingredient to a successful *Blitzkrieg* – overwhelming air support.

Back to the spring of 1942 and the southern sector for these four shots, illustrating the aftermath of a spectacular synchronised somersault. Coming in to land side-by-side at Otozeni, near Kharkov, on 5 May 1942, these two pilots of III./JG 77 failed to spot that part of the field was waterlogged. The result was a simultaneous nose-over, with both machines ending up on their backs

A closer look at one of the hapless *Friedrichs* ('Yellow 5'), wheels in the air and cockpit partially open



It is estimated that the Luftwaffe units deployed on the southern sector at this time amounted to only a quarter of the strength required to properly cover *Braunschweig's* two-pronged offensive. Combined with the growing numbers of Soviet aircraft appearing in the area, it was a recipe for disaster.

Having remained responsible for the southernmost part of the front, including the Black Sea coast and the Crimea, throughout the winter and spring of 1942, JG 77's component *Gruppen* began to be dispersed within days of the launch of the summer offensive. This seemingly inexplicable move, weakening yet further the *Jagdwaffe's* already inadequate presence in southern Russia, serves to illustrate just how overstretched Germany's fighter forces were becoming.

Fortunately both pilots were able to escape unharmed, suffering nothing worse than a ducking

Early in July I./JG 77 was transferred to the Mediterranean. At the same time Hauptmann Anton Mader's II. *Gruppe* moved to the region north of Kharkov to support the left flank of the 6. *Armee* as it set out on its fateful drive on Stalingrad. Having completed its re-equipment with Bf 109G-2s in August, III./JG 77 deployed even

With his boots and socks laid out to dry in the gun troughs of a neighbouring machine, at least one of the pair was able to retrieve his *Jabuko* (fighter pilot's overnight case) from his own overturned aircraft and change into dry underclothes!

further northwards in September adding its weight to the continuing pressure on Leningrad. The following month II. and III. *Gruppen* were withdrawn from Russia altogether to join I./JG 77 in North Africa.

During their final four months on the eastern front II. and III./JG 77 had been credited with some 775 Soviet aircraft destroyed between them. Over a quarter of this total had been claimed by just four pilots, all of whom were members of II. *Gruppe*, and included the three *Staffelkapitäne*.

Hauptmann Heinrich Setz, *Kapitän* of 4./JG 77, was the only one of the four to have been awarded the Knight's Cross prior to the launch of *Braunschweig*. Yet all would be sporting the Oak Leaves before leaving for North Africa, for

In August 1942 III./JG 77 exchanged its Bf 109Fs for early model *Gustavs*. The pilot to the right in front of this G-2 *'Kanonenboot'* (Gunboat), pictured on the Leningrad front in September, is future *Experte* and Knight's Cross winner Oberfeldwebel Johann Pichler. Note III. *Gruppe's* 'Wolf's head' badge

Hauptmann Heinrich Setz, *Staffelkapitän* of 4./JG 77, was already wearing the Oak Leaves when he downed a brace of Yak-1s on 24 July 1942 to take his total to exactly 100. The newly fledged 'centurion' clambers from the cockpit of his *Friedrich*. This time the badge on prominent display is the 'Sea eagle's head' of II. *Gruppe*

each had added 50 or more kills to his individual score to take it above the century mark.

Setz's 54 victories in these closing weeks had raised his eastern front total to 132. Oberleutnant Erwin Clausen, 6./JG 77's *Staffelkapitän*, scored 63 between July and September, which took his tally of Soviet victories to 114. Both Setz and Clausen would be killed in action in the west the following year while serving as *Gruppenkommandeure* of I./JG 27 and I./JG 11 respectively.

The *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 77, Oberleutnant Anton 'Toni' Hackl, claimed 56 victories during this period and left Russia with 105 eastern front kills. Feldwebel Ernst-Wilhelm Reinert, a member of Setz's 4. *Staffel*, achieved similar results, his 50 victories raising his Soviet total to 103. Subsequently adding a considerable number of western kills to their scoreboards, and winning the Swords in the process, Hackl and Reinert both managed to survive the war – the former as *Kommodore* of JG 11 with a final total of 192, and the latter as *Kommandeur* of IV./JG 27 with 174.

The transfer of JG 77 meant that yet another *Jagdgeschwader* had departed the Russian scene. But one *Jagdgruppe* which had left earlier for the Mediterranean was brought back in the later spring of 1942 to help bolster the *Jagdwaffe's* support of the coming summer offensive.

Between the end of May and the beginning of October I./JG 53 claimed an amazing 900+ victories as it, too, accompanied 6. *Armee's* advance on Stalingrad. And although many pilots added significantly to their individual totals during the *Gruppe's* temporary recall to the eastern front, once again there were four outstanding performances, which this time accounted for more than a third of all claims made.

Oberleutnant (later Hauptmann) Friedrich-Karl Müller, the *Staffelkapitän* of 1./JG 53, had already been awarded the Knight's Cross (for 22 victories) in September 1941, and had since added a trio of Hurricanes over Malta. On the road to Stalingrad he amassed 76 more kills, culminating in a brace of Soviet aircraft downed on 19 September, which took his score to 101, and earned him the Oak Leaves.

Hard on Müller's heels came two others – 3./JG 53's *Staffelkapitän*, Oberleutnant Wolfgang Tonne, and his erstwhile wingman, Feldwebel Wilhelm Crinius, both of whom had claimed their 96th victim on that same 19 September. Each got another kill 24 hours later. Although no longer flying together as a *Rotte* (two-aircraft formation), officer and NCO agreed to try for simultaneous centuries the next day. But luck was not with them. Tonne managed just one victory, while Crinius claimed a double. Success came on 22 September, however, with Crinius getting one more for his hundred and Tonne's three taking his score to 101.

Tonne had originally arrived back in Russia in May with a mere 13 kills to his credit. He had added 41 more to win his Knight's Cross on 6 September, and now, just 18 days later, he received the Oak Leaves. Crinius' feat was all the more remarkable in that his century had been achieved entirely in the Soviet Union over the past 16 weeks (he had opened his scoreboard on 9 June with a pair of *Stormoviks*). On 22 September his 100 victories won him the Knight's Cross and the Oak Leaves both on the same day! The two pilots' careers continued to run on parallel lines until each came to an end over Tunisia early in 1943 (see

Every century achieved gave rise to celebrations involving congratulatory placards and/or garlands and suitable liquid refreshment. Oberleutnant Friedrich-Karl *'Tutti'* Müller, *Kapitän* of 1./JG 53, appears to be coping admirably with two out of the three at Tusow, on the Stalingrad front, on 19 September. Like Setz (featured at the bottom of the previous page), Müller would later be killed in action on the western front

Another of I./JG 53's high scorers on the road to Stalingrad was Oberleutnant Wolfgang Tonne, *Kapitän* of 3. *Staffel*. He is pictured here (along with his canine friend) earlier in the campaign while still a leutnant, and with a victory tally only just into double figures

Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 2 - Bf 109 Aces of the Mediterranean and North Africa for further details).

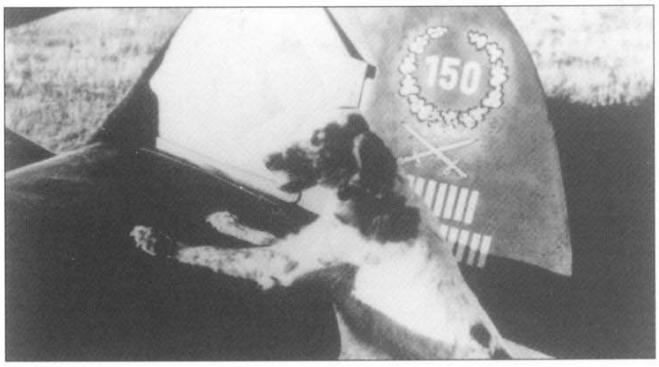
The fourth most successful pilot during the *Gruppe's* brief sojourn in Russia would not survive to make the return trip to the Mediterranean in October. 1. *Staffel's* Leutnant Walter Zellot scored his 70th kill of the present offensive on 9 September. It took his overall total to 85, but would also be his last. The following day the tail of his *Gustav* was shot off – reportedly by 'friendly' flak – over Stalingrad. Having been caught at low-level, there was insufficient height for his parachute to open.

As the above suggests, the Battle of Stalingrad had now been joined. In fact, 6. *Armee* had reached the outskirts of the city late in August. To the south, German mountain troops had raised their flag on Mount Elbrus, the highest peak in the Caucasus. But this was a gesture more for home newsreel consumption than of strategic significance, for neither of *Braunschweig's* stated objectives had been secured. The defenders of Stalingrad were holding on grimly, and the coveted oilfields remained tantalisingly out of reach on the far side of the Caucasus range.

Following the departure of JG 77 and I./JG 53, there were just two *Jagdgeschwader* left to cover the huge southern sector area as the second winter of the war in the east closed in – JG 3, which had accompanied von

Wearing the Oak Leaves with Swords, awarded on 19 May 1942 for 106 victories, Oberleutnant Hermann Graf (second from right) relaxes in the company of three of his 9./JG 52 Knight's Cross NCO *Experten*. They are, from left to right, Oberfeldwebel Ernst Süss (approximately 60 kills, killed in action on 20 December 1943), Feldwebel Hans Dammers (113 kills, died of wounds on 13 March 1944) and Oberfeldwebel Josef 'Jupp' Zwernemann (approximately 106 kills, killed in action on 8 April 1944)

Hermann Graf's 150th kill was reportedly claimed while flying this 'Yellow 11' . . .



. . . although the achievement was 'officially' recorded on the rudder of his regular mount, 'Yellow 1'

Paulus' 6. *Armee* across the steppe to Stalingrad, and JG 52, which had taken over JG 77's responsibilities for the Black Sea and Caucasus fronts.

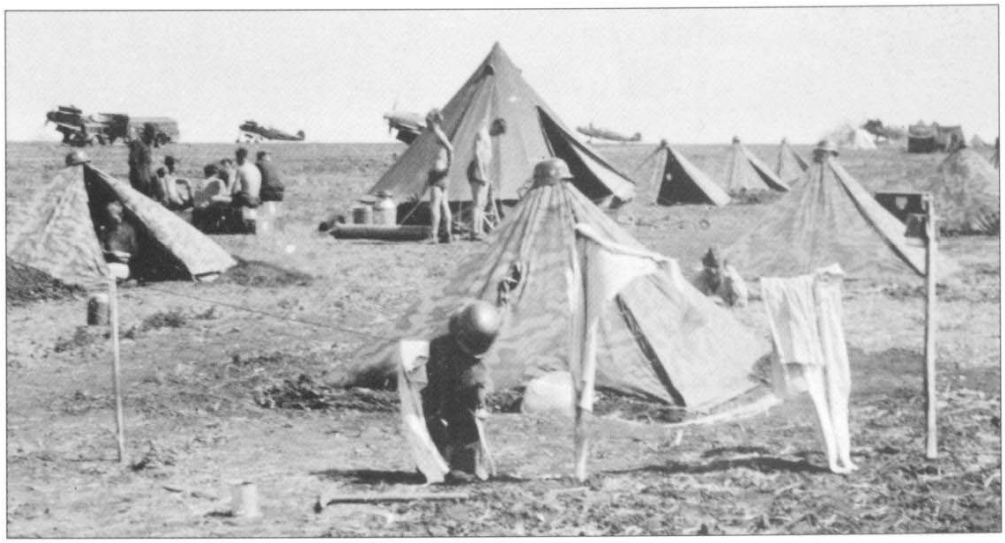
1942 was to witness the start of JG 52's steady rise to prominence as the most successful, and highest-scoring, of all eastern front Bf 109 *Jagdgeschwader* – not least because, for much of the time thereafter, it was the only eastern front Bf 109 *Jagdgeschwader*! But it was also fortunate in having a considerable number of truly exceptional pilots within its ranks.

Most of 1942 was dominated by the outstanding success of Leutnant Hermann Graf, who was awarded all four of Germany's highest decorations in the space of just eight months. On 24 January he won the Knight's Cross for 42 eastern front kills. Exactly two months later he became *Staffelkapitän* of 9./JG 52. Seven victories on 14 May elevated his score to 104, for which he received the Oak Leaves three days later. And just two days and two kills after that, he was honoured with the Swords.

On 4 September Graf became the second pilot to reach 150 (behind Major Gordon Gollob, who had achieved this total on 29 August while serving as caretaker *Kommodore* of JG 52). Now promoted to Oberleutnant, Graf's score continued to mount. 172 victories earned him the highest award of all, the Diamonds, on 16 September. And on 2 October he became the first member of the *Jagdwaffe* to attain the double century.

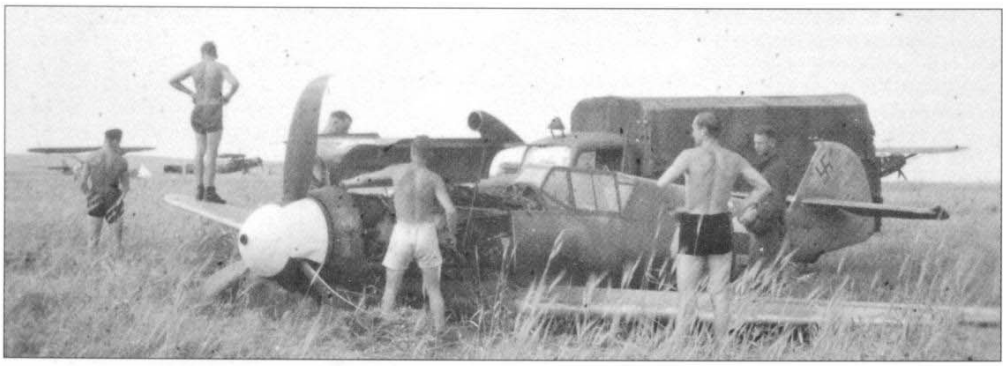
Although overshadowed by Graf's achievements, many other pilots were also putting in sterling performances. It is a measure of JG 52's growing success that over 20 Knight's Crosses and seven sets of Oak Leaves were awarded to the *Geschwader* during the course of 1942.

A typical *Feldflugplatz* (forward landing ground) as occupied by I./JG 52 in the late summer of 1942. The air of apparent tranquillity is deceptive, however, for each camouflaged pup tent is topped by its owner's steel helmet. A necessary precaution . . .



. . . for Soviet air raids were becoming increasingly frequent. The result of one such strike by Russian ground-attack aircraft – a Bf 109 totally wrecked by cannon fire (note the dead mechanic by the starboard wing root), with another blazing furiously in the background

But the groundcrews had to carry on with their essential duties despite the danger. Ever resourceful, the 'black men' of II./JG 52 have rolled the main wheels of these F-4s into shallow trenches, and jacked up their tails, to make it easier to work on the engines and adjust the armament



Soviet resistance in the air was also on the increase. This damaged *Friedrich* of II./JG 52 has made it back to friendly territory – a decidedly lush meadow housing the Hs 126s of a tactical reconnaissance *Staffel* . . .

. . . but the pilot of this III. *Gruppe* machine has not been so fortunate. A Red Army infantryman peers suspiciously into the radio compartment

A line-up of II./JG 52's new Gustavs in the early autumn of 1942. Although none display any unit badges, the two nearest machines have the densely mottled engine cowlings associated with this *Gruppe*

The majority of the recipients – the likes of Karl Hammerl, Ernst Süss, Heinz-Wilhelm Ahnert and Karl Steffen, all with scores in the high 50s and 60s – are now little remembered, but some deserve fuller mention. One such pilot is Feldwebel Leopold Steinbatz, who received JG 52's second Knight's Cross of the year on 14 February for 42 kills.

'Bazi' Steinbatz regularly flew as wingman to Hermann Graf. During May he scored 35 kills, and on 2 June won the Oak Leaves when his total reached 83. Less than a fortnight later, on 15 June, three victories took him to one short of his century, but he failed to return from this last mission, having himself fallen victim to AA fire while still over enemy territory. On 23 June Oberfeldwebel Leopold Steinbatz became the first NCO of the entire *Wehrmacht* to be honoured with the Swords, albeit posthumously.

On 3 June a Petlyakov Pe-2 twin-engined bomber despatched by Oberleutnant Helmut Bennenmann, *Staffelkapitän* of 3./JG 52, had provided the *Geschwader* with its 2000th victory of the war. But the rapidly lengthening scoreboard was not being achieved without cost. Only the day before, on 2 June, JG 52 had lost its first *Kommodore* to enemy action when Major Wilhelm Lessmann was also downed by Soviet flak.

His successor lasted less than three weeks. Returning to frontline service after his short stint at the RLM, the aloof Oberstleutnant

Featuring a similar cowling, 'Chevron 2' was often flown by Unteroffizier Hans Waldmann as wingman to II./JG 52's *Gruppenkommandeur* Johannes Steinhoff. The future *Experte* had a narrow escape in September 1942 when a Soviet anti-aircraft shell shredded his rudder (for a later aircraft of Waldmann's see colour profile 25)

Major Helmut Bennemann who, as a Hauptmann and *Kommandeur* of I./JG 52, claimed his *Gruppe's* 600th and 800th kills of the war. A month prior to the latter event Bennemann had received the Knight's Cross for a personal score of 50

Friedrich Beckh, who had made such little impression at the head of JG 51, was given scant time to leave his mark on JG 52. He was posted missing after a ground-attack mission east of Kharkov on 21 June. It was following Beckh's unexpectedly quick loss that JG 77's Major Gordon Gollob was brought in as acting *Kommodore* for eight weeks (during which time he claimed 43 kills, culminating in his 150th).

In mid-July I. and III. *Gruppen* began re-equipping with *Gustavs*. By this stage *Braunschweig's* southern spearheads were biting deep into the Caucasus. But while II. and III./JG 52 dutifully followed the ground advance, I. *Gruppe*, commanded now by Hauptmann Helmut Bennemann, was employed as a 'fire brigade' formation – Luftwaffe parlance for a unit sent at short notice to any area where sudden danger threatened (another telling indication of the paucity of fighter forces on the eastern front).

Shuttling between the southern and central sectors – ranging from the Kerch Peninsula on the Black Sea to the Moscow region and beyond – I./JG 52 was in near constant action. On 23 August another Pe-2 brought down by Bennemann was the *Gruppe's* 600th victory since hostilities began. Just over a month later, on 29 September, a LaGG-3 claimed by Hauptmann Johannes Wiese, *Staffelkapitän* of 2./JG 52, took their collective total to 700. The *Kommandeur's* 62nd, a MiG-3 downed on 2 November, raised the figure to 800. Such pressure could not be sustained indefinitely, however, and 48 hours later I./JG 52 handed over its remaining *Gustavs* to JG 3 and retired to Rostov to re-equip yet again.

Nor had there been any lack of aerial opposition over the Caucasus front in the interim, as the growing scores and associated awards among

One of Bennemann's then *Staffelkapitäne*, and his successor at the head of I./JG 52, was Hauptmann Johannes Wiese. His Knight's Cross was awarded on 5 January 1943 for 51 victories

Hauptmann Johannes Steinhoff, *Kommandeur* of II./JG 52, is seen easing himself into the cockpit of his *Gustav* – complete with the *Geschwader's* 'Winged sword' badge – in the Crimea in the late autumn of 1942

II. and III. *Gruppen* amply demonstrated.

Two of the Knight's Crosses won on 23 August had gone to members of Hauptmann Johannes Steinhoff's II./JG 52. Oberleutnant Gerhard Barkhorn, *Kapitän* of 4. *Staffel*, received his for 59 victories. Leutnant Heinz Schmidt had eight fewer kills, yet it was the latter who first reached the century, which earned him the Oak Leaves on 16 September. 'Johnny' Schmidt, who later became *Staffelkapitän* of 6./JG 52, might well have emerged as one of the true 'greats' of the eastern front had he not been shot down – in error, it is believed, by a Hungarian fighter – in September 1943 when his score was standing at 173.

II./JG 52's Leutnant Heinz 'Johnny' Schmidt. The combination of Bf 109F and the state of undress of the mechanic would seem to indicate that this photograph was taken a little earlier than the one featuring his *Kommandeur*, 'Macki' Steinhoff – the floral tribute suggests that this event was perhaps Schmidt's 50th kill, or the announcement of his Knight's Cross shortly thereafter on 23 August

In III. *Gruppe* Hermann Graf continued to reign supreme. But one of his fellow *Staffelkapitäne*, Oberleutnant Günther Rall of 8./JG 52, was just resuming the climb which would ultimately take him into the *Jagdwaffe's* top three. Rall had been seriously wounded back in November 1941. Now, on 3 September 1942, and less than a week after returning to operations, he was awarded the Knight's Cross for 65 kills. The following month, on 26 October, Rall's century would bring with it the Oak Leaves.

During that same October – by which time eastern front scores in triple figures, if not exactly commonplace, were no longer altogether rare – four young leutnants, 'freshly-baked' from fighter training school, arrived at JG 52's *Stab* HQ at Maikop in the Caucasus.

Geschwaderkommodore Major Dietrich Hrabak's welcoming pep talk was cut short by the crash-landing of a flak-damaged Bf 109 on the field outside. Somewhat chastened by this introduction to the realities of frontline service, the four were flown on 48 hours later to Soldatskaya, the home of Major Hubertus von Bonin's III. *Gruppe*. Here, they were paired off between 7. and 9. *Staffeln*, and each was assigned to an experienced NCO pilot whose job it was to show them the ropes.

Oberfeldwebel Edmund Rossmann's charge was eager – perhaps too eager. On their first contact with the enemy he overtook his leader, sprayed bullets in the general direction of 'two dark green aircraft', got lost, and forced-landed out of fuel 32 km (20 miles) away from base. It was not an auspicious beginning.

Three weeks later, on 5 November, he got a second chance. One of a *Schwarm* (formation of four aircraft) attacking a force of 18 Il-2s, escorted by ten LaGG-3 fighters, he succeeded in downing one of the heavily-armoured *Stormoviks*. Although debris from his victim damaged his own machine, and resulted in another forced-landing, Leutnant Erich Hartmann – destined to become the most successful fighter pilot in aviation history – had scored his first kill.

It would take him three months to claim a second – three months which were to seal the fate of the 6. *Armee* at Stalingrad.

Severely wounded the previous year, and following a long convalescence, Oberleutnant Günther Rall returned to his 8./JG 52 on 28 August. Within two months he was awarded the Knight's Cross and the Oak Leaves, and would end the war as the world's third-highest scoring fighter pilot

STALINGRAD AND ZITADELLE

The main fighter unit tasked with supporting the ground troops' advance on Stalingrad was Oberstleutnant Günther Lützow's JG 3. This *Geschwader* had been re-assembled on the southern sector in the late spring of 1942, with *Stab* and II. *Gruppe* returning from the Mediterranean, and III./JG 3 being brought back from a brief stint in the Lake Ilmen area in the north. A new I. *Gruppe* had been activated to make good the original I./JG 3's transfer to the west and re-designation as II./JG 1.

As von Paulus' army forged eastwards across the dry, dusty steppe towards the Volga, JG 3 faced increasing opposition in the skies overhead. The determination of the enemy to blunt the German offensive and to defend Stalingrad is indicated by the severity of their losses. By year's end JG 3's pilots would have claimed over 2200 aerial victories.

Wearing JG 3's distinctive 1942 'Mediterranean mix' camouflage scheme (see colour profile 7), an F-4/trop of the new I. *Gruppe* displays the recently introduced 'Winged U' (for 'Udet') *Geschwader* badge on the cowling, and I./JG 3's own 'crossed cutlasses' below the windshield

Groundcrew swarm over the F-4/trop (note mounting holes for the absent dust filter immediately below the gun trough) of Hauptmann Wolfgang Ewald. This photograph was reportedly taken in July 1942, although the reason for the obvious excitement remains unknown – unless perhaps it is the announcement of Ewald's appointment as *Kommandeur* of III./JG 3 (he replaced Major Karl-Heinz Greisert, who was killed in action against I-16s on 22 July)

The markings on this *Friedrich* identify it as the mount of III./JG 3's *TO*, Leutnant Heinrich Graf von Einsiedel, and the five kill bars on the rudder (two surmounted by roundels and three by red stars) definitely date it as July 1942 – von Einsiedel's fifth was a Pe-2 downed on the 4th of that month. Both von Einsiedel and Ewald, seen in the photograph at the base of the previous page, would come down behind enemy lines, near Stalingrad and Kursk respectively, and spend many years in Soviet hands

Wearing the Oak Leaves (awarded on 27 August for achieving his century four days earlier) Hauptmann Kurt Brändle, *Kommandeur* of II./JG 3, displays more than a passing interest in an engine change being carried out on one of his *Gruppe's* fighters

The *Geschwader's* success was broad-based. During this period no fewer than 19 pilots, all with totals ranging between the high 40s and 60s, were awarded the Knight's Cross, but only one actually claimed 100 kills on the road to Stalingrad.

Ever since *Kommodore* Günther Lützow's century the previous October – and its attendant ban on his further combat flying – the *Stabsschwarm* had been without a regular leader in the air. In May 1942 Hauptmann Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke, ex-*Kommandeur* of III./JG 53, was brought in to fulfil this function. Already wearing the Knight's Cross, and with 38 victories to his credit, 'Fürst' Wilcke quickly proved his worth, accounting for 118 of the *Geschwaderstab's* final 191 kills on the eastern front (34 of the remainder went to Adjutant Hauptmann Walther Dahl of later Fw 190 *Sturm* fame).

On 12 August Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke officially assumed command of JG 3. Less than a month later, on 9 September, he was awarded the Oak Leaves for 100 victories. A further 55 kills by the end of December earned him the Swords, and then it was Major Wilcke's turn to face a ban on all further operational flying.

Two of the earlier Knight's Cross winners had also received the Oak Leaves for attaining an overall total of 100 victories by the late summer of 1942. The three victories (a solitary Hurricane and a pair of *Stormoviks*) claimed by Oberleutnant Viktor Bauer, *Staffelkapitän* of 9./JG 3, on 25 July took his score to 102, and resulted in the Oak Leaves the following day.

Almost exactly a month later II. *Gruppe's Kommandeur*, Hauptmann Kurt Brändle, was also credited with three victories – including a brace of LaGG-3s – which raised his total to 102. He was presented with the Oak Leaves on 27 August. Unlike Bauer, who was transferred to a training unit shortly after receiving his award, and survived the war, Major

Kurt Brändle was killed in action in the west late in 1943 with a final score standing at 172.

By late August 6. *Armee* was fighting its way into Stalingrad. During the second week of September JG 3 began moving up to Pitomnik, a small airstrip some 12 miles (20 km) to the west of the city. Suitably enlarged and fortified, it would serve as the *Geschwader's* main base for the next two months. It also briefly housed elements of JG 52 and I./JG 53.

But the storm was about to break . . .

Despite a long and bloody struggle, von Paulus' men were unable to prise Stalingrad's defenders from their last desperate toeholds among the ruined buildings lining the west bank of the Volga. Then, on 19 November, as the street-fighting in the city was approaching its climax, the Soviets suddenly counter-attacked.

In a huge pincer movement, strong forces crossed the Volga to the north and south of Stalingrad. Smashing through the Axis flanks, they joined up 43 miles (70 km) to the west of the city three days later. The

Come the Russian autumn, come the Russian mud. A pilot of II./JG 3 wades towards his G-2 *'Kanonenboot'* as groundcrew struggle to remove its protective tarpaulin . . .

. . . having clambered up on to the wing, the pilot tries to lend a hand . . .

. . . before lowering himself down on to the port mainwheel and letting the experts finish the job. Now all he has to do is get 'White 6' out of that flooded dispersal!

As the second winter of the campaign closed in on the eastern front the *Jagdwaffe* put into practice the lessons hard-learned from the previous year's unpreparedness. Dispersal pens were strengthened against both the elements and enemy bombing raids . . .

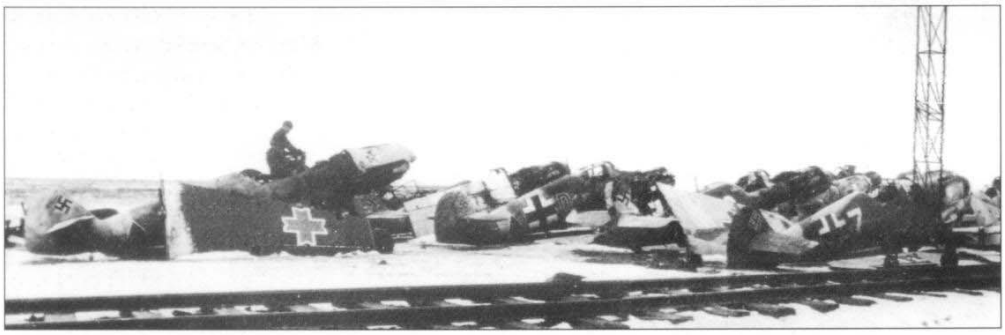
. . . and its fighters had their wheel and undercarriage leg covers removed to prevent compacted snow building up between them and causing take-off and landing accidents . . .

besiegers had become the besieged. Over 20 German and satellite divisions were encircled and cut off, and among the 250,000 men trapped within the Stalingrad perimeter were more than 200 JG 3 groundcrew, mainly from I. *Gruppe*, who had been unable to escape from Pitomnik.

Meanwhile, the bulk of the *Geschwader* had retreated to Tazinskaya and Morozovskaya, about 185 miles (300 km) to the south-west of Stalingrad. These two airfields, universally referred to as Tazi and Moro, were the

. . . and suitably attired groundcrew used rubber hammers and wooden mallets to keep flying surfaces free from snow and ice

There was also an efficient aircraft recovery and repair organisation. But the speed of the surprise Soviet counter-offensive at Stalingrad overran the Chir railhead collecting point before these damaged machines could be transported to the rear. The black triangle on the Bf 109E in the foreground identifies it as a ground-attack aircraft of II./SchlG 1. But note JG 53's 'Ace-of-Spades' and JG 3's 'Winged U' on the noses of the Bf 109s to the left . . .

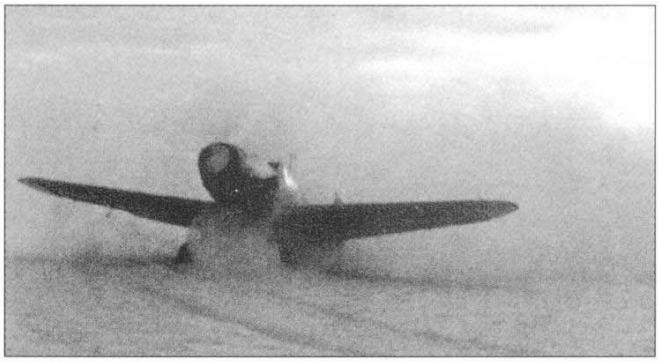


major bases from which was mounted the ill-fated attempt to supply 6. *Armee* by air. And to offer the gallant but near defenceless Ju 52 transports some protection while inside the perimeter, and during turnaround on the ground at Pitomnik, Major Wilcke called for volunteers to form the so-called *Platzschutzstaffel* (Airfield defence squadron) Pitomnik.

Some 22 pilots responded to the appeal. Led by Hauptmann Rudolf Germeroth, *Staffelkapitän* of 3./JG 3, they would remain in Pitomnik – under conditions and amidst scenes which quickly degenerated from the merely appalling to the truly horrific – until mid-January 1943.

During these two months of unimaginable hardship, they nonetheless managed to claim 130 Soviet aircraft destroyed. The *Platzschutzstaffel's*

. . . while this shot of another area of the Chir facility (including the wing of a Rumanian Air Force Bf 109) shows at right, below the gantry, 3./JG 3's 'Yellow 7' still wearing the modified Mediterranean camouflage of the previous spring



This anonymous *Gustav*, following another's tracks across a snow-covered field in the gloom of a mid-winter's day, typifies the conditions under which the *Platzschutzstaffel* Pitomnik operated. However, it cannot convey the horror that was unfolding around them as 6. *Armee* fought, suffered and died

most successful pilot was Feldwebel Kurt Ebener of II. *Gruppe*, whose 35 kills took his total to 52, and won him the Knight's Cross. But, inevitably, there were casualties too. Among those lost was an earlier Knight's Cross recipient, I. *Gruppe's* Oberleutnant Georg Schentke, who was forced to bail out over Soviet-held territory beyond the perimeter after downing a bomber – his 90th kill of the war – on Christmas Day.

By 15 January 1943 Pitomnik was in imminent danger of being overrun as the Red Army tightened its noose around Stalingrad. And 48 hours later the remaining *Gustavs* of the *Platzschutzstaffel* were ordered to fly out.

The epic Battle of Stalingrad is rightly regarded as the turning point of the war in the east. But it was the third and final great German summer offensive of the eastern front campaign – code-named *Zitadelle* – which finally dashed any remaining hopes Hitler may have had of defeating his arch enemy Stalin.

Although JG 52 was not directly involved in the closing stages of the fight for Stalingrad, Hauptmann Johannes Steinhoff's II. *Gruppe* had been brought up from the Caucasus front in mid-December 1942 to support the abortive attempt by 4. *Panzer-Armee* to break through to the besieged city from the south-west. It was at the height of this action, on 19 December, that Oberleutnant Gerhard Barkhorn, *Staffelkapitän* of 4./JG 52, was able to attain his century.

Both JGs 3 and 52 would, however, be committed to *Zitadelle*. But first a new danger threatened. 17. *Armee*, the southern arm of the now defunct *Braunschweig* operation, was still deep in the Caucasus, and at grave risk of being cut off by Red Army advances to its north. To avoid another Stalingrad, these troops would have to be evacuated from the Kuban, across the Kerch Straits, to the Crimea. Throughout the first half of 1943 much of the two *Geschwaders'* activities were consequently centred on these areas of the Black Sea coast.

Knight's Cross wearer Georg 'Peterle' Schentke of the Pitomnik volunteer *Staffel*, who was posted missing after bailing out over enemy territory on Christmas Day 1942. He is pictured here as an Oberfeldwebel serving with 9./JG 3 earlier in the year. Note the Bf 109F-4's segmented 'Mediterranean' camouflage, Ill. *Gruppe's* 'Double-headed axe' badge, and Schentke's nickname (which he shared with his pet cat!) below the cockpit

I./JG 3 had already been withdrawn back to the Reich late in January, before the final surrender at Stalingrad. But two pilots of Major Kurt Brändle's II. *Gruppe* would reach their centuries over the Kuban bridgehead on consecutive days in the spring. On 27 April one of a pair of lend-lease Bostons gave Oberleutnant Joachim Kirschner his 100th victory. Kirschner, the *Kapitän* of 5. *Staffel*, was already wearing the Knight's Cross (awarded on 23 December for 51 victories), and he would duly

Although the featureless expanse of the southern steppe gives nothing away as to the exact location, the two German rifles leaning against the trailing edge of 'White 2's' port wing, and the cavalry patrol just visible in the right background, would seem to suggest that this unknown 4./JG 3 pilot just managed to reach friendly lines before making a successful belly-landing in the spring of 1943

Studying a map with a group of his pilots, 5./JG 3's Oberleutnant Joachim Kirschner (centre, wearing a lifejacket and fur collar) wears the Knight's Cross, awarded at the height of the battle of Stalingrad (for 51 kills), and the Oak Leaves, won in the aftermath of *Zitadelle* (for 170 kills)

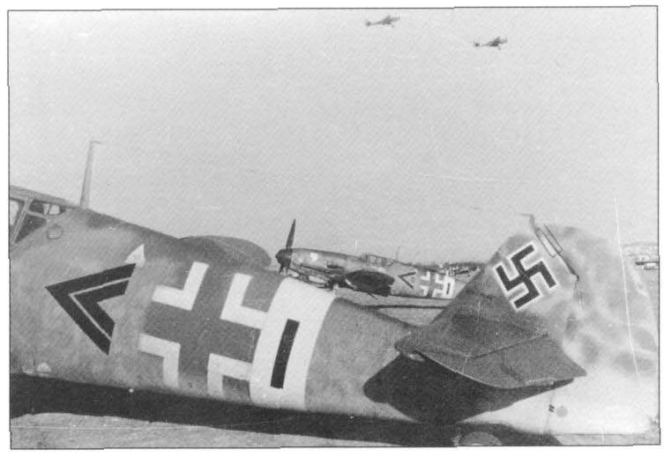
become JG 3's top scorer – with 175 kills – before being posted to the command of IV./JG 27 in October.

Twenty-four hours after Kirschner's century, a trio of LaGG-3s took the score of 4. *Staffel*'s Leutnant Wolf Ettel to exactly 100. But Ettel would have to wait until 1 June for his Knight's Cross – by which time his total was standing at 120!

Based to the north of the Crimea, only one member of III. *Gruppe* reached treble figures in the months leading up to *Zitadelle*. Another of 1942's Knight's Cross winners, Leutnant Wilhelm Lemke, *Staffelkapitän* of 9./JG 3, had achieved his 100 with the destruction of a La-5 on 16 March.

Meanwhile, JG 52 was evacuating its forward bases down in the Caucasus. These fields, along the line of the River Terek, which flows into the Caspian Sea, were the easternmost airstrips occupied by the Luftwaffe during the war against the Soviet Union. By mid-March II. and III. *Gruppen* were back guarding the all-important Kerch Straits, which was the most vulnerable bottleneck along 17. *Armee's* main line of retreat.

Although displaying the insignia of Major Wolfgang Ewald, *Kommandeur* of III./JG 3, the *Gustav* in the foreground was being flown by Leutnant Adolf von Gordon of the *Gruppenstab* when it was lost in action against Il-2s on 24 April 1943. Note the Stukas taking off overhead



The original Soviet caption claims this to be 'a Nazi plane shot down by pilots of the air squadron named after Chkalov in action over the Kuban area in May 1943'. Although it is unlikely that the Russian pilots had deliberately targeted this machine, the 15 kill bars on its rudder reveal it to be the regular mount of one Erich Hartmann, wingman to 'Graf Punski' Krupinski of 7./JG 52 (Hartmann's 15th victory was a U-2 biplane downed on 15 May). But 'White 2' was being piloted by Unteroffizier Herbert Meissler when it was forced to land behind enemy lines. It is not known whether the smoke has been caused by combat damage, or by Meissler's deliberately setting fire to the aircraft after landing. Incidentally, the confusion of markings on the rear fuselage was caused by III. *Gruppe's* white wavy bar being painted across the yellow theatre band, which had itself been applied directly over the last two letters of the fighter's original delivery KJ+GU *Stammkennzeichen*

On 2 March 1943 66-victory *Experte* Oberleutnant Walter Krupinski had assumed command of 7. *Staffel*. It was Krupinski's spectacular crash-landing which had greeted Erich Hartmann's arrival at JG 52 back in October, and now 'Graf Punski' ('Count Punski'), as Krupinski was popularly known, selected the same promising young Leutnant – whose score by this time had risen to four – as his wingman.

In contrast, 4. *Staffel's* Oberfeldwebel Willi Nemitz was one of the oldest frontline pilots serving in the Luftwaffe. Nicknamed 'Altvater' ('Old Father') on account of his advanced years, the 32(!)-year-old Nemitz was awarded the Knight's Cross, for 54 kills, on 11 March. But exactly one month – and 27 victories – later Oberfeldwebel Nemitz would be killed in action against Soviet fighters above II. *Gruppe's* Anapa base.

On 20 April Hauptmann Günther Rall, *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 52, claimed the *Geschwader's* 5000th enemy aircraft destroyed. Another 11 weeks would see that total climb to 6000, but success on this scale could not be achieved without loss. Among the many casualties was Hauptmann Rudolf Miethig, long-serving *Kapitän* of 3. *Staffel*. Miethig was one of the *Geschwader's* 20+ Knight's Cross winners of the previous year, having received the award (for 50 kills) on 29 October – the same day as Walter Krupinski (for 53).

By 10 June 1943 Rudolf Miethig's score had reached the century. But he was himself killed on that date over the Kuban bridgehead when he brought down his 101st victim by ramming.

In the first days of July *Stab*, I. and III./JG 52 moved up from the Black Sea coast into the Ukraine in preparation for Operation *Zitadelle*. This third summer offensive was aimed at eradicating the Soviet salient at

Kursk, which projected westwards into the German front like a huge fist, and threatened to split the central and southern sectors wide open.

Zitadelle was very much a ground battle. In fact, it developed into the largest armoured confrontation in military history, although air power played an important part, too. Fighter cover was to be provided by eight *Jagdgruppen*, divided between the northern and southern flanks of the 'bulge' around Kursk. To the north were four *Gruppen* of Fw 190s, and to the south, four of Bf 109Gs – II. and III./JG 3 and I. and III./JG 52.

Operation *Zitadelle* was launched early on the morning of 5 July. And for a few brief hours those fighter pilots who had participated in *Barbarossa* experienced again the kind of success that had marked the opening rounds of the air war in the east. By the end of the first day of *Zitadelle* it is estimated that the Soviets had lost 432 machines – mainly bombers and ground-attack aircraft attempting to halt the advancing Panzers.

Major Kurt Brändle's II./JG 3 accounted for 77 of them, with a couple of Il-2s downed seven hours apart providing the 150th victories for two members of the *Gruppe*. The first had been claimed by Oberleutnant Joachim Kirschner, *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 3, and was one of nine kills credited to him that day. The second was among the *Kommandeur's* own bag of five (four Il-2s and a single Yak-1). Another pilot to bring down five was Oberleutnant Werner Lucas, *Kapitän* of 4. *Staffel*, who thereby took his total to 92.

III. *Gruppe's* top scorer of the day was Oberleutnant Emil Bitsch, *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 3, with six – his 75th to 80th victories. Fellow *Kapitän* Oberleutnant Wilhelm Lemke of 9. *Staffel* also claimed six, but three of these were unconfirmed.

The most successful of all were two *Staffelkapitäne* of JG 52. Hauptmann Johannes Wiese of 2./JG 52 shot down no fewer than 12 Soviet machines, which left him five short of his century – a situation he remedied exactly five days later. And 7. *Staffel's* Walter Krupinski was just one behind with 11 aircraft destroyed. But 'Graf Punski' was severely wounded claiming the last of these, and for the next six weeks 7./JG 52 would be led by acting *Staffelkapitän* Leutnant Erich Hartmann, whose own four victories on this day had elevated his score to 21.

Hauptmann Walter Krupinski, *Staffelkapitän* of 7./JG 52 from March 1943 to March 1944, is seen here wearing the Oak Leaves awarded to him on 2 March 1944 (for 177 eastern front victories). He was transferred to the west shortly after this photograph was taken, where he in turn served with JGs 5, 11 and 26, before finally joining Me 262-equipped JV 44

***Gustavs* of I./JG 52 enjoy the sun on a forward landing strip near Bessonovka, east of Byelgorod, at the time of Operation *Zitadelle* in July 1943**

After all the pictures of snow and ice, a blazing sun is not something immediately associated with the war in the east – but this unteroffizier of 4./JG 3 is no doubt grateful for the improvised sunshade as he sits at readiness at Kharkov-Rogan during a break in the *Zitadelle* operations

Forty-eight hours later a kill by one of Wiese's 2. *Staffel* pilots, Oberleutnant Paul-Heinrich Dähne, provided I./JG 52 with its 800th kill of the war – and the *Geschwader* with its 6000th.

Despite these undoubted successes in the air, on the ground *Zitadelle* was already in deep trouble. The Red Army had also been planning a major offensive in the same area, and the two forces were soon locked in a titanic struggle. Although deploying the mighty 55-ton Tiger tank for the first time in any significant numbers, Germany's Panzer divisions were unable to achieve a breakthrough.

After only eight days Hitler conceded that Operation *Zitadelle* had failed in its purpose. Citing the imminent loss of Sicily and the growing threat to southern Europe as the more important of his priorities, he ordered much of the armour to be withdrawn.

On 21 July two of JG 3's recent multiple scorers, Emil Bitsch and Walter Lucas, both attained their century. Before the month was out Brändle and Kirschner, each having reached 150 on the opening day of *Zitadelle*, had raised their totals to 170 a piece. This brought Joachim Kirschner the Oak Leaves on 2 August – Kurt Brändle had received this award exactly one year earlier for just 100 victories!

The *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 3, Oberleutnant Joachim Kirschner (in the dark flight blouse), is congratulated by Oberleutnant Förster of the *Geschwaderstab* on his 150th kill (an Il-2 downed in the opening minutes of *Zitadelle* on 5 July 1943). This claim also reportedly represented 5. *Staffel's* 500th collective victory, and the 2000th of the war for II. *Gruppe*!

Among JG 3's rank and file at this period was a young NCO pilot with just 32 kills. But Unteroffizier Gerhard Thyben's time was yet to come. After transferring to JG 54 and converting on to the Fw 190, he too would ultimately join the top two dozen eastern front *Experten*. First, however, he would have to see some months' service in the west, for at the beginning of August 1943 II. and III./JG 53 were pulled out of Russia to join the *Geschwaderstab* and I. *Gruppe* in defence of the Reich.

This left JG 52 alone in the east.

FIGHTING RETREAT

The *Führer's* abrupt abandonment of *Zitadelle* set the scene for the closing chapter in the story of the Bf 109 on the eastern front. In the months that followed, the component *Gruppen* of JG 52 would be constantly on the move. As the Red Army grew in strength and gathered momentum in its drive towards Germany, they found themselves being shuttled from one point of danger to the next with increasing frequency and desperation.

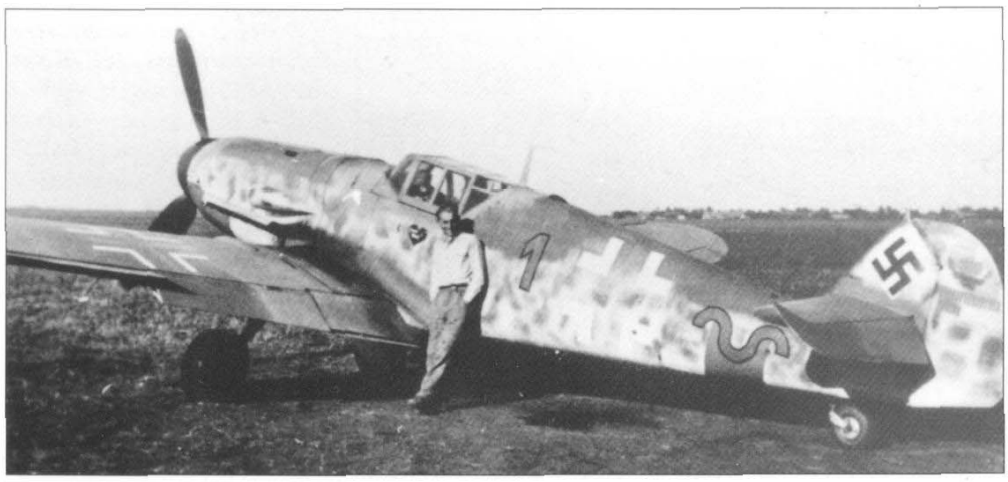
Under such conditions – often operating from makeshift landing strips, threatened with being overrun by Soviet tanks on the ground, and facing ever-mounting odds in the air – it is a wonder that they survived. That they produced the most successful fighter pilots the world has ever seen is little short of incredible.

JG 52's nomadic existence commenced within days of the Kursk offensive's being called off, with I. *Gruppe* transferring from Polatava to Kharkov-South, and III. *Gruppe* moving to Orel on the northern flank of the 'bulge'. But after just five days at Orel III./JG 52 returned southwards. It was now that Leutnant Erich Hartmann's extraordinary abilities began to reveal themselves.

The last of four Soviet fighters claimed on 3 August gave Hartmann his half-century. By the middle of the month a succession of multiple daily kills in the Kharkov area had raised that total to more than 80. And when the *Staffelkapitän* of 9./JG 52, 113-victory *Experte* Leutnant Berthold Korts, was reported missing in action on 29 August (the same day, incidentally, that the award of his Knight's Cross was announced), it was Hartmann who was chosen by *Gruppenkommandeur* Major Günther Rall to replace him.

With 90 kills already to his credit, Erich Hartmann's year-long leadership of 9./JG 52 would see his personal score rise to an incredible 301. His distinctively-marked aircraft, latterly each with its black

In the month following his promotion to *Staffelkapitän* of 9./JG 52 on 2 September 1943, Leutnant Erich Hartmann regularly flew this Bf 109G-6 (see colour profile 29) in combat



Erich Hartmann, as an oberleutnant, is seen in the cockpit of a later G-6 (note the clear-vision Erla canopy). 9. *Staffel's* famous 'Pierced heart' emblem and 'Karaya' call-sign are also clearly evident – less so is the name *'Ursel'*, in white, in the top left segment of the heart. It appears that Hartmann used two familiar names for his girlfriend/fiancée/wife Ursula – 'Ursel' and 'Usch'

'tulip'-patterned nose, reportedly earned him the nickname of 'The Black Devil' among his opponents.

His own pilots, inspired by their *Kapitän's* simple but effective four-part formula for success in the air – 'locate, decide, attack, break away' – keenly followed his example. Many achieved high scores. Soon the entire 'Karaya' *Staffel* (so named after 9./JG 52's radio call-sign) was as famous as its youthful leader. Dismissive of his own achievements, however, Erich Hartmann took far greater pride in the fact that he never lost a wingman in combat.

Meanwhile II./JG 52, which had remained in the Kuban during the abortive *Zitadelle* offensive, was also transferred up into the Kharkov-Poltava region. Hauptmann Gerhard Barkhorn had assumed command of the *Gruppe* on 1 September. And six days later fledgling *Experte* Leutnant Helmut Lipfert took over at the head of 6. *Staffel* after the previous *Kapitän*, 173-victory Oak Leaves wearer Hauptmann Heinz Schmidt, had been shot down – purportedly in error by that Hungarian fighter.

Celebrating his 200th kill, Hauptmann Günther Rall (left), *Kommandeur* of III./JG 52, poses at Makeyevka on 29 August 1943 with Walter Krupinski (centre) and an unknown pilot

Back at III. *Gruppe*, September had also seen both the award of the Swords to *Kommandeur* Hauptmann Günther Rall (on the 12th for his double century), and Erich Hartmann reaching his 100th – an Airacobra brought down, along with a trio of La-5s, over the River Dnieper on the 20th.

Just over a month later another Airacobra claimed by Hartmann, on 29 October, raised his total to 148, and resulted in a long overdue Knight's Cross. He was now just behind his good friend, and mentor, Oberleutnant Walter Krupinski, *Staffelkapitän* of 7./JG 52 (whose Knight's Cross had

Over the next three months Rall claimed 50 more Soviet victims, and is here being congratulated by his mechanic for having just despatched the 250th on 28 November

been awarded exactly one year earlier – for 53 victories), who had reached 150 on 1 October.

A welcome spell of home leave meant that Hartmann's own 150th would not be achieved until the last day of the year. JG 52's two high-scoring *Gruppenkommandeure* were still well in the lead, however. Günther Rall's 250th had gone down on 28 November, and Gerhard Barkhorn's 200th just 48 hours later.

But, as so often in the past, such individual successes in the air could do little to influence events unfolding on the ground. On 6 November the Soviets had recaptured Kiev. The whole southern sector was in danger of collapse. I./JG 52, commanded now by Hauptmann Johannes Wiese, was brought up from its Crimean bases to the exotically named Malaja-Wiska (inevitably 'Malaya-Whisky' to the troops) south of the Ukrainian capital. Here they were joined by elements of both II. and III./JG 52.

In the early hours of 14 January 1944 Russian armour attacked the packed airfield. Before the enemy could be repulsed a number of casualties had been suffered by the groundcrews, and eight aircraft had been damaged when their tails were apparently crushed by Soviet tanks driving over them. The remaining *Gustavs* escaped shortly after first light and dispersed on neighbouring strips.

Although the third winter of the war on the southern sector was by no means as severe as the previous two, the all-pervading mud posed huge

Fellow *Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Gerhard Barkhorn of II./JG 52 reached the 250 mark on 13 February 1944. Once again, the chief mechanic is on hand to toast 'his' pilot's success

problems. At least half-a-dozen pilots were lost in take-off and landing accidents, and sorties had to be broken off prematurely as engines overheated, their radiator intakes clogged with mud thrown up while taxying. Aviation fuel had to be distributed in 200-litre (45-gal) drums by horse and cart, which was the only wheeled transport that could cope with the boggy conditions on many airfields.

Nevertheless, missions continued to be flown. Operating over the Uman region, III. *Gruppe* claimed 50 victories in 60 days. On 2 March Erich Hartmann's ten kills took his total to 202, this achievement winning him the Oak Leaves. Walter Krupinski and Johannes Wiese were similarly honoured on the same day (for 177 and 125 victories respectively), and all three men were summoned to Hitler's Alpine retreat to receive their awards.

On the penultimate leg of their journey, by rail to Salzburg, they were joined by Gerhard Barkhorn, also en route to Berchtesgaden to be pre-

Here is another of Barkhorn's numerous Bf 109s – probably an earlier G-6 (note the length of the aerial mast and the absence of direction-finding loop mounting) photographed shortly after his appointment as *Kommandeur* of II. *Gruppe*. The photograph reveals obvious differences in the application of both his wife's name below the cockpit and his 'lucky 5' incorporated in the command chevrons. Both were Barkhorn's personal markings throughout the war

A long-serving member of the famed 'Karaya' *Staffel*, Oberfeldwebel (later Leutnant) Hans Dammers was most meticulous in recording his achievements. He is seen here wearing his Knight's Cross, which was awarded to him back in August 1942 for 51 kills. These, and his many more aerial victories since, are presumably depicted on the port side of that rudder. On the starboard surface are listed, from top to bottom, 23 unconfirmed kills, 11 aircraft destroyed on the ground, as well as 8 locomotives, 39 horse-drawn wagons, 34 trucks, 3 anti-aircraft guns and 1 command half-track!

sented with the Swords for his 250th. Liquid refreshment flowed a little too freely – courtesy of a friendly train conductor – and, despite the drive in sub-zero temperatures up to the *Führer's* eyrie in an open-topped car (a desperate ploy by a worried aide), they were still far from sober on arrival.

While in an ante-room waiting to be ushered in to the Presence, Erich Hartmann took a fancy to a smart peaked cap which he had spotted hanging on a hat-stand. It was four sizes too large, and came down over his ears. Fortunately, while the other three were convulsed with laughter, the same harassed, but quick-thinking aide snatched the hat off Hartmann's head, thus sparing the *Führer* the ludicrous sight of his own uniform cap half-hiding the face of the young Luftwaffe officer he was about to decorate.

Such moments of light-hearted relaxation were few and far between, and it was soon back to the harsh realities of the front. On 13 March another of JG 52's little-known 'centurions', Leutnant Hans Dammers, was rammed by a crashing Soviet aircraft. A Knight's Cross wearer and 113-victory *Experte*, Dammers, who was a member of Hartmann's own 9. *Staffel*, died of his injuries four days later.

On 18 March Erich Hartmann was promoted to oberleutnant. By now III./JG 52 was the most successful *Gruppe* of the *Geschwader*, scoring its 3500th collective kill of the war on 21 March. But such figures accounted for little in the present crisis. A new Soviet spring offensive was underway, and at the end of the month III. *Gruppe* departed Russian soil, withdrawing to Lemberg (Lvov), in Poland.

Among the decorations awarded to III./JG 52 in March 1944 were the Oak Leaves on the 2nd to Leutnant Erich Hartmann (centre), *Kapitän* of 9. *Staffel*, for 200 victories, and the Knight's Cross on the 23rd to Leutnant Friedrich Obleser (left), *Kapitän* of 8. *Staffel*, for 80. Leutnant Karl 'Charlie' Gratz, on the right, had received his Knight's Cross in July 1942 for 54 victories. All three would add substantially to their respective scores before war's end

Meanwhile, I. and II./JG 52 had been involved in the final days' fighting in the Crimea. II. *Gruppe's Staffelkapitäne* were particularly prominent at this period. Relative newcomer Feldwebel Hans Waldmann, whose 84th kill on 5 February had earned him the Knight's Cross and promotion to leutnant, took over 4. *Staffel* from fellow Knight's Cross holder and 80+ *Experte* Leutnant Heinrich Sturm on 17 April. After claiming 121 victories in the east, 'Dackel' Waldmann would be transferred to Defence of the Reich duties and lose his life in a mid-air collision between two Me 262s on 18 March 1945.

Another trio of JG 52's leading *Experten*, who achieved a staggering 669 eastern front kills between them. Pictured in the summer of 1944, they are, from left to right, Hauptleute Gerhard Barkhorn and Wilhelm Batz, *Kommandeure* of II. and III. *Gruppen* respectively, and Leutnant Otto Fönnekold, *Kapitän* of 5. *Staffel*

Longer-serving *Experte* Oberleutnant Wilhelm Batz, who had commanded 5. *Staffel* since May 1943, received the Knight's Cross for 75 kills on 26 March. On 19 April he would take over III. *Gruppe* from Major Günther Rall when the latter – his eastern front total having reached 271 – was appointed *Kommandeur* of II./JG 11 in the west. Batz's position at the head of 5. *Staffel* was in turn filled by another Knight's Cross holder, 100+ *Experte* Leutnant Otto Fönnekold.

Lastly, 6. *Staffel's* Leutnant Helmut Lipfert was also scoring steadily. His 90th on 5 April had won him the Knight's Cross. Six days later an 'all-white *Stormovik*' provided him with his century.

But, here too, individual achievements in the air were having little effect on events on the ground. The last German troops were evacuated from the Crimea on 13 May, and II./JG 52 had been withdrawn a week earlier. Retiring to Kherson, it was joined by III. *Gruppe*, brought back down from Poland in a forlorn attempt to help stem the Red Army's inexorable advance westwards along the Black Sea coast.

At Kherson the two *Gruppen* were subjected to near-constant Soviet bombing raids, and Lipfert's 6./JG 52, in particular, lost a number of aircraft. By 9 May the field was under Russian artillery bombardment, although III. *Gruppe* had prepared for this contingency. Having removed the armour-plating and radio equipment, there was room in each *Gustav's* rear fuselage for two extra bodies. Every pilot took off for Zarnesti, in Rumania, with two mechanics aboard.

One of the last to taxi out, Lipfert's machine was damaged by Soviet shell-fire, and the *Staffelkapitän* of 6./JG 52 was forced to complete his journey as a rather cramped passenger in the *Gruppen*-Adjutant's fighter.

On 10 May JG 52 claimed its 9000th enemy aircraft of the war. But it was a war now entering its final year, already irretrievably lost. The *Geschwader's* withdrawal into Rumania did not bring any easing of pressure. Quite the reverse in fact, for now also assigned the additional task of helping to defend the vital Rumanian oilfields, all three *Gruppen* found themselves facing a new enemy – the Americans.

This 2nd Bomb Group B-17G was a typical *'Starflight'* victim. It is not known with certainty which *Gruppe* was responsible for downing the US 'heavy' near Mährisch-Ostrau in mid-August 1944. The feather-hatted gentlemen guarding the scene appear to be members of the local *Feldgendarmerie*

Code-named *Sternflüge* (*Starflights*), the missions undertaken against the US heavy bombers, and their fighter escorts, flying in across the Adriatic from Italy proved both unrewarding and costly. Surviving records indicate that JG 52's six-week defence of Rumania's oil netted just 15 American aircraft, of which only three were four-engined 'heavies'. Two of the latter – both B-24s – were claimed by Oberleutnant Helmut Lipfert and his wingman Unteroffizier Tamen during the *Starflight* mission of 24 June. II. *Gruppe* had despatched its entire strength – nine *Gustavs* – against the incoming Americans. By the day's end it had two left!

Bad as things were in the east, they were apparently even worse in the Homeland, where much of the Reich's defensive fighter strength had been rushed to the Normandy invasion front. Already stretched to the limit, JG 52's position was further weakened when it was ordered to give up three *Staffeln* (one per *Gruppe*) for service in the west. Although

In the spring of 1944 pilots within JG 51 began reverting from Fw 190s back on to the Bf 109. Focke-Wulf *Experte* Leutnant Günther Josten of 1. *Staffel* – soon to be appointed *Kapitän* of 3./JG 51 – gets to grips with the cockpit layout of his new *Gustav* at Bobruisk in April

The pilots of JG 51 were soon demonstrating their mastery of their new mounts. One of the unit's G-6s carries out a low-level pass for the benefit of the photographer

completely new 2., 4. and 7. *Staffeln* would be activated later in the year, it would by then be far too late to reverse the *Geschwader's* fortunes.

For in June 1944 the Red Army had unleashed its last great summer offensive, which was aimed at smashing open the central sector and paving the way for the drive on Berlin. From now on JG 52 would regularly be facing aerial odds of 40-to-1 or more against.

Late in June III. *Gruppe* was transferred northwards to the Minsk area of the central front, where it was to operate under the control of JG 51. This *Geschwader* had converted back on to Bf 109s a few weeks earlier (reportedly because of the demands for the Fw 190 from other fronts), and would remain almost entirely equipped with Messerschmitts until war's end.

Despite the enemy's overwhelming superiority, JG 51 would produce some half-dozen 100+ *Experten* during these final months, although most, if not all, of them had already claimed the majority of their victims while flying the Focke-Wulf. One such was the *Geschwader's* highest scorer, Oberleutnant Anton Hafner, *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 51, who had received the Oak Leaves on 11 April for 134 kills. He had added another 70 to that total by the time of his death in action during a low-level dogfight with a Yak-9 on 17 June.

Three more of the *Geschwader's* current *Staffelkapitäne* were also very successful in battling the odds, and all would survive the war with the Oak

But nothing could now halt the advance of the victorious Red Army. This winter-camouflaged *Gustav*, captured by the Soviets towards the close of 1944, is believed to be a machine abandoned by JG 51

Leaves. 1./JG 51's Oberleutnant Joachim Brendel amassed 189 kills in the east, more than 90 of which were *Stormoviks* – universally regarded as the most difficult enemy aircraft to bring down. Leutnant Günther Josten of 3./JG 51 also included more than 60 Il-2s in his overall total of 178. The third, Leutnant Günther Schack of 9./JG 51, who had been awarded the Oak Leaves (for 133 victories) just nine days after Anton Hafner, took his final score to 174.

But none could compete with JG 52's leading *Experten*. On 4 July Erich Hartmann won the Swords for 239 kills. It took him another fortnight to reach his 250th – one of a trio of *Stormoviks* downed on 18 July. He was the fourth *Jagdwaffe* pilot (three of them from JG 52) to attain this figure.

By this time III./JG 52 was back with the rest of the *Geschwader* again operating in the Lemberg (Lvov) region of Poland. On 2 July *Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Wilhelm Batz received the Oak Leaves for 175 victories. It was a period of intense activity for JG 52 as the *Gruppen* were rushed back and forth along the front from Poland up into Lithuania, back to Poland, then south to Rumania.

Nothing could stop Erich Hartmann, however. Another string of successes culminated in eight kills on 23 August, and no fewer than eleven the day thereafter. The last five of these latter, all claimed in the space of twenty minutes, took his total to an amazing 301! He was the first fighter pilot in the world to score a triple century. A telegram from Adolf Hitler arrived 24 hours later, awarding him the Diamonds, and summoning

On 26 August 1944 in a cramped wooden hut in his East Prussian HQ, Adolf Hitler awards the now Oberleutnant Erich Hartmann with the Diamonds for his 301 aerial victories – the first fighter-pilot in the world to top the triple century!

Returning to 9./JG 52's base south of Warsaw the following day, Erich Hartmann poses with his devoted friend and indispensable other half of the successful team – his chief mechanic Heinz 'Bimmel' Mertens

136-victory *Experte* Leutnant Otto Fönnekold of 5./JG 52 was killed by a ground-strafing P-51 while landing at Budak, in Hungary, on 31 August 1944

him to the *Führer's* 'Wolf's Lair' forest HQ in East Prussia for the presentation ceremony the following day.

Afterwards over coffee and tea, Hitler, with unusual candour, admitted to his highest-scoring fighter pilot that, 'militarily, the war is lost, Hartmann'. Nevertheless, the young Oberleutnant returned to his *Staffel* and, like the rest of JG 52, continued to fight on as the eastern front collapsed about them.

The end of August brought with it a change of government, and a change of sides, for Rumania. The one-time Axis ally now declared war on Germany, so II./JG 52, which had been operating in Rumania, retired to Budak, in Hungary, on 31 August. The move was taking them dangerously close to the western Allies at their backs, as was demonstrated

Oberstleutnant Dietrich Hrabak commanded JG 52 from 1 November 1942 through to 30 September 1944. He is seen here in the cockpit of his G-6 with Erich Hartmann, *Kapitän* of 9. *Staffel*, who is helping him with his harness straps. 8./JG 52's Friedrich Obleser and Karl Gratz appear amused by Hartmann's solicitude. The presence of the latter pair, and the sticking plaster on Hartmann's cheek, would seem to suggest that this photograph was taken at about the same time as that on page 74

Hrabak's successor at the head of JG 52 was no stranger to the *Geschwader*. Having recovered from wounds suffered during his spell undertaking Defence of the Reich missions, the erstwhile *Kapitän* of 9. *Staffel*, Oberstleutnant Hermann Graf, returned to the eastern front to lead JG 52 for the remaining seven months of the war

on that very same day. 136-victory *Experte* Leutnant Otto Fönnekold, *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 52, had just landed at Budak and was taxying in when he was strafed and fatally injured by a solitary Mustang.

Also involved in the retreat from Rumania was I./JG 53. This *Gruppe* had been transferred up from the Mediterranean to help protect the Ploesti oilfields back in May. Its pilots had seen action mainly against the USAAF in the interim, and they had scored only a handful of successes against the Soviet air force – including a quartet of Yak-9s and a single Il-2 for *Gruppenkommandeur* Major Jürgen Harder – before they too withdrew into Hungary.

I./JG 53 would remain in the east until the end of the war, vacating Hungary for Austria towards its close. During these final six months the *Gruppe* claimed some 90 kills. The vast majority of these were Russian, but the tally did include a couple of American aircraft – and one Rumanian-flown Bf 109.

The most successful of the *Gruppe's* pilots was Hauptmann Helmut Lipfert, erstwhile *Staffelkapitän* of 6./JG 52, who assumed command of I./JG 53 on 15 February 1945. Lipfert's first kills as *Kommandeur* – two Soviet fighters exactly one week after his arrival – raised his score to 181. His last claim, for a Yak-9 downed on 16 April, took his final tally to 203. It also won him the *Jagdwaffe's* last Oak Leaves of the war 24 hours later.

Meanwhile, JG 52 had been continuing the unequal struggle, responding as best it could to each fresh new danger, scoring victories, suffering casualties.

On 1 September 1944 Erich Hartmann was promoted to hauptmann. The following day Hauptmann Adolf Borchers, who had succeeded Johannes Wiese as *Kommandeur* of I./JG 52, claimed his 118th kill – and the *Geschwader's* 10,000th since the beginning of the war! This unique accomplishment provided a propaganda highlight in those days of otherwise almost unrelieved gloom for the German people. A special *Geschwader* march was even composed and broadcast on the national radio.

On the last day of the month JG 52 lost its longest-serving *Kommodore* when Oberstleutnant Dietrich Hrabak left to take over JG 54. His successor proved no stranger to JG 52 – Oberstleutnant Hermann

Hauptmann Erich Hartmann is seen here shortly before leaving the famed 'Karaya' *Staffel* to set up the new 4./JG 52. His replacement as *Kapitän* of 9./JG 52 was . . .

. . . Leutnant Hans-Joachim Birkner, who claimed 117 kills during his brief 14-month combat career

Graf, who had won the Diamonds when *Kapitän* of 9. *Staffel* back in September 1942, returned from Defence of the Reich duties to lead the *Geschwader* through its final months, and ultimately into Soviet captivity.

On that same 30 September Hauptmann Erich Hartmann relinquished command of the famous 9. 'Karaya' *Staffel* to activate the newly formed 4./JG 52. His replacement as leader of 9./JG 52 was Leutnant Hans-Joachim Birkner, who had often flown as Hartmann's wingman. A relative newcomer, Birkner had claimed his first kill exactly a year earlier. On 14 October he would achieve his century.

By then III. *Gruppe* had been rushed up into East Prussia, the area where the Red Army had just set foot for the first time on German soil. III./JG 52 were later joined there by I. *Gruppe*. In the meantime, II. *Gruppe* was operating over Hungary where, its pilots reported, the *Stormoviks'* rear-gunners had taken to lobbing hand grenades at them if they got too close to their tails!

Bad weather during the closing weeks of the year restricted operational activity. In December two Knight's Cross *Staffelkapitäne* were killed in take-off accidents – 9./JG 52's Hans-Joachim Birkner suffered engine failure at Cracow, in Poland, on 14th, and Hauptmann Heinrich Sturm of 5./JG 52 somersaulted when his wheels clipped a truck at Csor in Hungary eight days later.

Hauptmann Hartmann climbs from the cockpit of the all-white G-6 depicted in Iain Wyllie's cover painting, reportedly after just claiming his only non-JG 52 victory of the war – a Yak-9 destroyed on 4 February 1945 while serving as temporary acting *Kommandeur* of I./JG 53

Sturm was succeeded by another Knight's Cross wearer, Leutnant Peter Düttmann, whose exploits during his two-year operational career with II. *Gruppe* resulted in his crashing or forced-landing no fewer than 19 times – mostly as a result of anti-aircraft fire. Düttmann nevertheless survived the war at the head of 5. *Staffel*. His final number of confirmed victories totalled exactly 150 – plus a brace of Soviet tanks which, in 1945, were being equated with aerial kills!

On 4 January 1945 Major Gerhard Barkhorn became the second, and only other, *Jagdwaffe* pilot to achieve 300 victories. Less than a fortnight later he left II./JG 52 to take command of JG 6 in Defence of the Reich. II. *Gruppe's* new commander was to be Hauptmann Wilhelm Batz, who moved across from III./JG 52 on 1 February.

Batz's position was in turn filled by Hauptmann Adolf Borchers, *Kommandeur* of I./JG 52. This left vacant the leadership of I. *Gruppe*, which was assumed by 331-victory Hauptmann Erich Hartmann.

The fate of I./JG 53 was closely bound up with that of JG 52 during the final weeks' hostilities. Located in Czechoslovakia at the time of the capitulation, members of I. and III./JG 52 suffered long years of post-war Soviet captivity. Only Austrian-based II./JG 52 succeeded in surrendering to the Western Allies. Pictured at Neubiberg in May 1945, the late-model *Gustav* in the foreground is a machine of II./JG 52. But the diamond-shaped patch of overpainting on the cowling, obliterating the famous 'Ace-of-Spades' insignia, suggests it has been taken over from I./JG 53

This frenetic round of command re-shuffling paled into insignificance against movements on the ground. By now the rapidly advancing Soviet Army was chasing I. and III./JG 52 out of one Silesian airfield after the other on an almost daily basis. In mid-March it retired down into Czechoslovakia. II. *Gruppe*, meanwhile, crossed the Hungarian border into Austria.

At the beginning of March 1945 Hauptmann Erich Hartmann was taken off operational flying and ordered to report to Lechfeld for conversion training on the Me 262 jet. Just what the world's most successful fighter pilot – now with 346 kills – could have achieved in one of these revolutionary machines must remain conjectural. For Hartmann turned down Adolf Galland's subsequent invitation to join his elite JV 44, opting instead to return to I./JG 52 in the east as requested in a telegram from Oberstleutnant Hermann Graf.

There, on 17 April, he claimed his 350th enemy aircraft destroyed. Four days later fellow *Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Wilhelm Batz became the last member of the *Jagdwaffe* to receive the Swords. By now, however, such individual successes, and such decorations – increasingly irrelevant of late – were totally meaningless. The centre of Berlin was already coming under Soviet artillery fire. On 30 April Adolf Hitler would commit suicide.

Hauptmann Erich Hartmann's 352nd and final kill, an unidentified Yak fighter, went down over Brünn (Brno), in Czechoslovakia, on 8 May 1945 – the last day of the war in Europe.

Lastly, and dedicated to every pilot – *Experte* or otherwise – who suffered the rigours of the eastern front, one final reminder of the two greatest of them all – Gerhard Barkhorn (20 March 1919 to 8 January 1983) . . .

. . . and Erich Hartmann (19 April 1922 to 20 September 1993)

APPENDICES

Pilots with 100+ Eastern Front Victories

	Eastern Front Victories (1)	*Others (2)*	*Knight's Cross (3)*	*Oak Leaves*	*Swords*	*Diamonds*	*Eastern Front JG(s)*
Hptm Erich Hartmann	352	-	148	200	239	301	52
Maj Gerhard Barkhorn	301	-	59	120	250		52
Maj Günther Rall	271	4	65	100	200		52
Oblt Otto Kittel (+)	267	-	123	152	230		54*
Maj Walter Nowotny (+)	255	3	56	189	218	250	54*
Maj Wilhelm Batz	232	5	75	175	?		52
Hptm Helmut Lipfert	203	-	90	203			52, 53
Oberst Hermann Graf	202	10	42	104	106	172	52
Maj Heinrich Ehrler (+)	200+	-	41	112			5
Oblt Walter Schuck	198	8	84	171			5
Hptm Joachim Brendel	189	-	95	156			51*
Oblt Anton Hafner (+)	184	20	60	134			51*
Oblt Gunther Josten	178	-	84	161			51*
Obstlt Hans Philipp (+)	177	29	(20)	62	82		54
Maj Walter Krupinski	177	20	53	177			52
Maj Theodor Weissenberger	175	33	38	112			77, 5
Hptm Günther Schack	174	-	116	133			51*
Hptm Heinz Schmidt (+)	173	-	51	102			52
Hptm Max Stotz (+)	173	16	53	100			54*
Hptm Joachim Kirschner (+)	167	21	51	170			3
Maj Horst Ademeit (+)	165	1	53	c120			54*
Maj Kurt Brändle (+)	160	20	49	100			53, 3
Hptm Heinrich Sturm (+)	c157	-	82				52
Oblt Gerhard Thyben	152	5	116	?			3, 54*
Oblt Hans Beisswenger (+)	151	1	47	100			54*
Lt Peter Düttmann	150	-	91				52
Oberst Johannes Steinhoff	148	28	35	101	(167)		52
Hptm Emil Lang (+)	148	25	119	144			54*
Lt Fritz Tegtmeier	146	-	99				54*
Oberst Gordon Gollob	144	6	42	85	107	150	3, 77
Oblt Albin Wolf (+)	144	-	117	144			54*
Hptm Rudolf Trenkel	138	-	75				77, 52
Oberst Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke (+)	137	25	25	100	155		53, 3
Oblt Walter Wolfrum	137	-	126				52
Maj Erich Rudorffer	136	86	(19)	130	210		54*
Hptm Karl-Heinz Weber (+)	136	-	100	136			51*
Oblt Otto Fönnekold (+)	136	-	100+				52
Maj Johannes Wiese	133	-	51	125			52
Maj Heinrich Setz (+)	132	6	c50	76			77
Maj Anton Hackl	c130	c62	48	104	(150)		77
Maj Franz Eisenach	129	-	107				54*
Maj Adolf Borchers	127	5	78				51, 52*

	Eastern Front Victories (1)	*Others (2)*	*Knight's Cross (3)*	*Oak Leaves*	*Swords*	*Diamonds*	*Eastern Front JG(s)*
Oblt Heinrich Sterr (+)	127	3	86				54*
Lt Kurt Tanzer	126	17	35				51*
Lt Gerhard Hoffmann (+)	125+	-	125				52
Oblt Hans Waldmann (+)	125	9	84	(?)			52
Hptm Wilhelm Lemke (+)	125	6	50	(c125)			3
Hptm Franz Schall (+)	c123	c14	117				52
Hptm Franz Dörr	122	6	95				5
Lt Karl Gratz	121	17	54				52
Oblt Wolf Ettel (+)	120	4	120	(124)			3
Ofw Heinz Marquardt	120	1	89				51*
Oblt Friedrich Obleser	120	-	80				52
Lt Franz-Josef Beerenbrock	117	-	42	102			51
Lt Hans-Joachim Birkner (+)	117	-	98				52
Lt Jakob Norz (+)	117	-	70				5
Lt Heinz Wernicke (+)	117	-	112				54*
Oberst Adolf Dickfeld	115	21	47	101			52
Maj Erwin Clausen (+)	114	18	52	101			77
Lt Hans Dammers (+)	113	-	51				52
Lt Berthold Korts (+)	113	-	113				52
Hptm Alfred Grislawski	109	24	40	(114)			52
Oberst Dietrich Hrabak	109	16	(16)	118			54, 52*
Oblt Bernhard Vechtel	108	-	93				51*
Oblt Franz Woidich	108	2	80				52
Oblt Josef Zwernemann (+)	c106	c20	57	101			52
Hptm Werner Lucas (+)	105	1	52				3
Hptm Emil Bitsch (+)	104	4	105				3
Oblt Ernst-Wilhelm Reinert	103	71	53	103	(?)		77
Lt Heinz Sachsenberg	103	1	101				52
Oberst Viktor Bauer	102	4	34	102			3
Hptm Rudolf Miethig (+)	101	-	50				52
Lt Ulrich Wernitz	101	-	82				54*
Obstlt Friedrich-Karl Müller (+)	100	40	c30	100			53, 3
Lt Wilhelm Crinius	100	14	100	100			53

Key

(1) = includes US aircraft claimed over Rumania and Hungary
(2) = kills claimed in West, Mediterranean, Balkans and Reich
(3) = figures in awards columns indicate number of victories at the time of award (figures in brackets for award won in another theatre)
(*) = after JG indicates pilot's score includes kills on Fw 190
(+) = after name indicates killed or missing
(c) = *circa*

Bf 109s on the Eastern Front – Representative Orders of Battle

21 June 1941 – Operation *Barbarossa*

			Variant	Est/Serv
Luftflotte 1 (Northern Sector)				
Stab JG 54	Maj Hannes Trautloft	Lindental	F	4-3
I./JG 54	Hptm Hubertus von Bonin	Rautenberg	F	40-34
II./JG 54	Hptm Dieter Hrabak	Trakehnen	E/F	40-33
III./JG 54	Hptm Arnold Lignitz	Blumenfeld	F	40-35
II./JG 53	Hptm Heinz Bretnütz	Neusiedel	F	35-33
Luftflotte 2 (Central Sector)				
Stab JG 27	Maj Wolfgang Schellmann	Sobolevo	E	4-4
II./JG 27	Hptm Wolfgang Lippert	Berzniki	E	40-31
III./JG 27	Hptm Max Dobislav	Sobolevo	E	40-14
II./JG 52	Hptm Erich Woitke	Sobolevo	F	39-37
Stab JG 51	Obstlt Werner Mölders	Siedlce	F	4-4
I./JG 51	Hptm H-F Joppien	Staravis	F	40-38
II./JG 51	Hptm Josef Fözö	Siedlce	F	40-23
III./JG 51	Hptm Richard Leppla	Halaszi	F	38-30
IV./JG 51	Maj Friedrich Beckh	Crzevica	F	38-26
Stab JG 53	Maj Frh G von Maltzahn	Crzevica	F	6-6
I./JG 53	Oblt Wilfried Balfanz	Crzevica	F	35-29
III./JG 53	Hptm Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke	Sobolevo	F	38-36
Luftflotte 4 (Southern Sector)				
Stab JG 3	Maj Günther Lützow	Hostynne	F	4-4
I./JG 3	Hptm Hans von Hahn	Dub	F	35-28
II./JG 3	Hptm Lothar Keller	Hostynne	F	35-32
III./JG 3	Hptm Walter Oesau	Modorovka	F	35-34
Stab JG 52	Maj Hans Trübenbach	Bucharest/Mizil	F	4-3
III./JG 2	Maj Gotthard Handrick	Mizil/Pipera	F	43-41
Stab JG 77	Maj Bernhard Woldenga	Bacau	E	2-2
II./JG 77	Hptm Anton Mader	Roman	E	39-19
III./JG 77	Hptm Alexander von Winterfeld	Bacau	E/F	35-20
I.(J)/LG 2	Hptm Herbert Ihlefeld	Janca	E	40-20
				Totals: 793-619

July 1942 – *circa* Operation *Braunschweig*

Luftflotte 1 (Northern Sector)				
Stab JG 54	Obstlt Hannes Trautloft	Siverskaya	F	2-1
I./JG 54	Hptm Hans Philipp	Krasnogvardeisk	F/G	40-25
II./JG 54	Maj Dietrich Hrabak	Ryelbitzi	F	40-28
III./JG 54	Hptm Reinhard Seiler	Siverskaya	F	22-18
Lw.Kdo Ost (Central Sector)				
Stab JG 51	Obstlt Karl-Gottfried Nordmann	Orel	F	2-1
I./JG 51	Hptm Heinrich Krafft	Vyasma	F	31-15
II./JG 51	Hptm Hartmann Grasser	Orel	F	34-30
III./JG 51	Hptm Richard Lappla	Vyasma	F	37-22
IV./JG 51	Hptm Hans Knauth	Sechinskaya	F	36-29
Luftflotte 4 (Southern Sector)				
Stab JG 3	Obstlt Günther Lützow	Millerovo-North	F	3-2
I./JG 3	Hptm Georg Michalek	Morosovskaya	F	24-9
II./JG 3	Maj Kurt Brändle	Millerovo	F	22-10
III./JG 3	Maj Karl-Heinz Greisert	Millerovo	F	25-12
Stab JG 52	Maj Herbert Ihlefeld	Taganrog	F	4-4
II./JG 52	Hptm Johannes Steinhoff	Taganrog	F	40-24
III./JG 52	Maj Hubertus von Bonin	Kharkov	F/G	35-20
I./JG 53	Maj Herbert Kaminski	Kharkov	F/G	40-8
Stab JG 77	Maj Gordon Gollob	Kastornoye	F	4-4
II./JG 77	Hptm Anton Mader	Kastornoye	F	23-16
III./JG 77	Hptm Kurt Ubben	Kerch-IV	F	27-21
Luftflotte 5 (Arctic)				
II./JG 5	Hptm Horst Carganico	Petsamo	E/F	35-25
III./JG 5	Hptm Günther Scholz	Petsamo	E/F	23-17

Totals: 549-341

July 1943 – *circa* Operation *Zitadelle*

Luftflotte 4 (Southern Sector)				
II./JG 3	Maj Kurt Brändle	Kharkov-Rogan	G	46-30
III./JG 3	Maj Walther Dahl	Bessonovka	G	36-25
Stab JG 52	Obstlt Dietrich Hrabak	Krivotorovka	G	4-2
I./JG 52	Hptm Helmut Bennemann	Poltava	G	36-27
II./JG 52	Hptm Helmut Kühle	Anapa	G	42-27
III./JG 52	Maj Günther Rall	Orel	G	31-14
Luftflotte 5 (Finland/Arctic)				
II./JG 5	Obstlt Kurt Kettner	Alarkurtti	E/F/G	23-18
III./JG 5	Maj Heinrich Ehrler	Petsamo	E/F/G	26-24

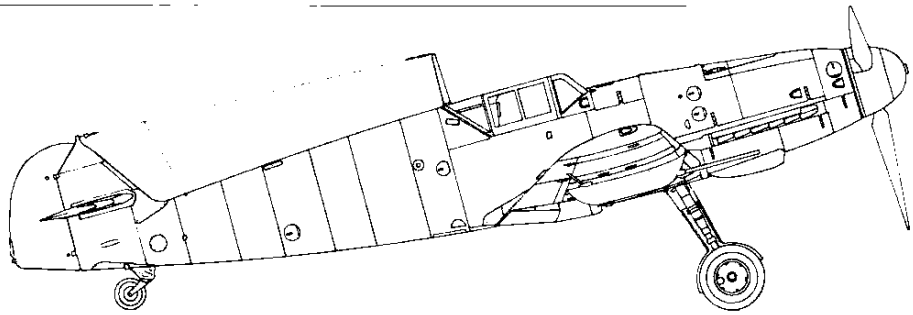
Totals: 244-167

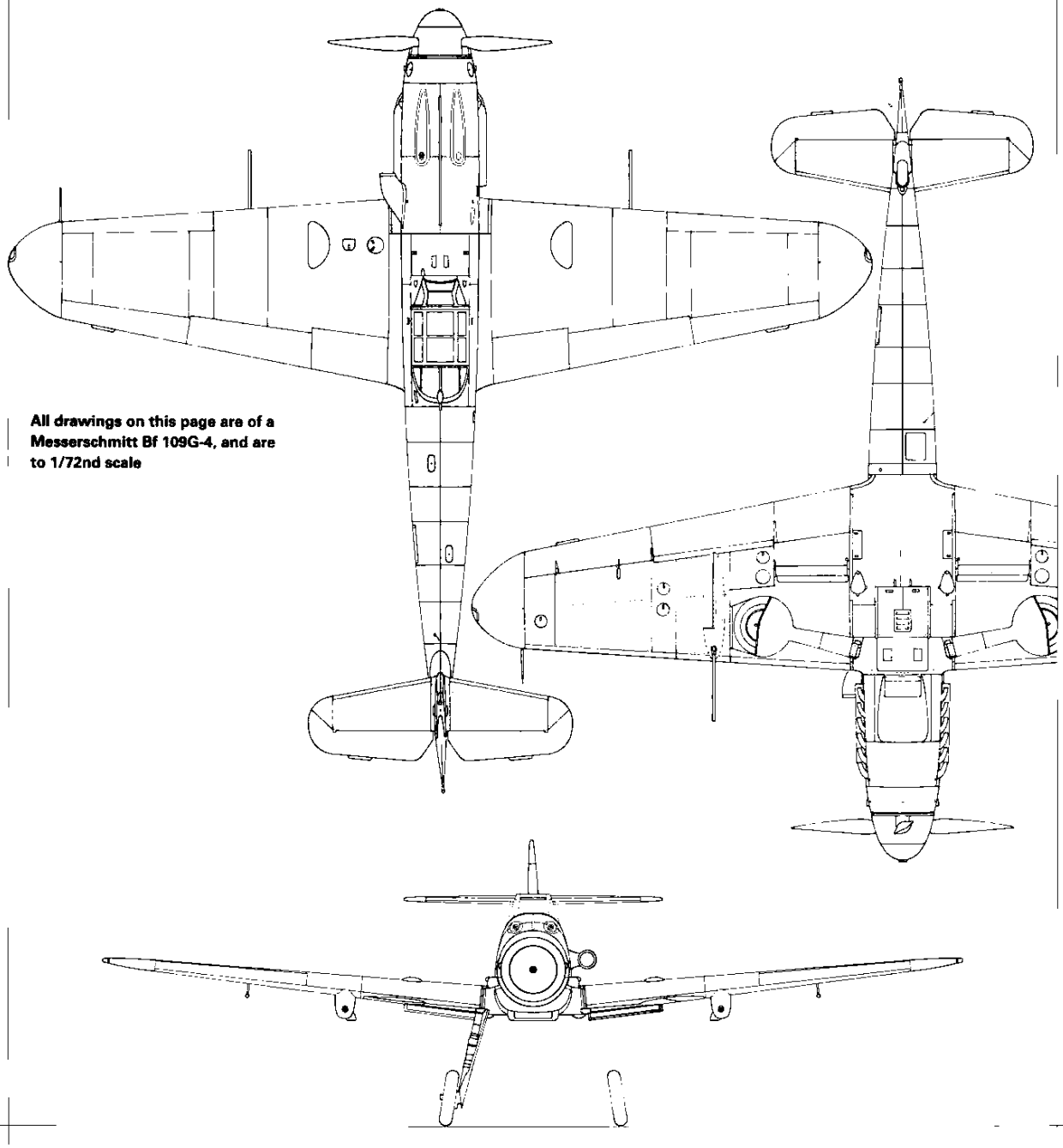
26 June 1944 – Soviet Summer Offensive

Luftflotte 6 (Central Sector)				
I./JG 51	Maj Erich Leie	Orscha	G	35-20
III./JG 51	Hptm D von Eichel-Streiber	Bobruisk	G	31-14
Luftflotte 4 (Southern Sector)				
Stab JG 52	Obstlt Dietrich Hrabak	Manzar	G	1-1
I./JG 52	Hptm Adolf Borchers	Leipzig (Rum)	G	23-20
II./JG 52	Hptm Gerhard Barkhorn	Manzar	G	11-7
III./JG 52	Hptm Wilhelm Batz	Roman	G	19-15
I./JG 53	Maj Jürgen Harder	Targsorul-Nou	G	28-24
Luftflotte 5 (Arctic)				
III./JG 5	Hptm Franz Dörr	Petsamo	G	24-21
				Totals: 172-122

April 1945

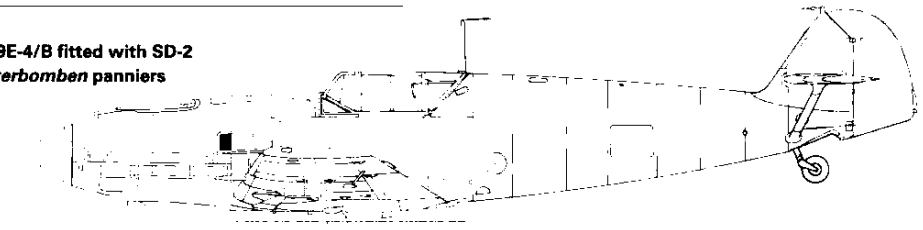
I.w.Kdo. Ostpreussen (Northern Sector)				
I./JG 51	Hptm Günther Schack	Littausdorf	G	10-8
III./JG 51	Hptm Joachim Brendel	Junkertroylhof	G/K	23-7
Luftflotte 6 (Central Sector)				
Stab JG 52	Obstlt Hermann Graf	Deutsch-Brod	G	8-7
I./JG 52	Hptm Erich Hartmann	Chrudim	G	37-34
III./JG 52	Maj Adolf Borchers	Deutsch-Brod	G/K	40-33
Luftflotte 4 (Southern Sector)				
II./JG 51	Oblt Otto Schulz	Fels am Wagram	G	7-5
II./JG 52	Hptm Wilhelm Batz	Hörsching	G/K	55-36
I./JG 53	Hptm Helmut Lipfert	Hörsching	G	27-25
				Totals: 207-155



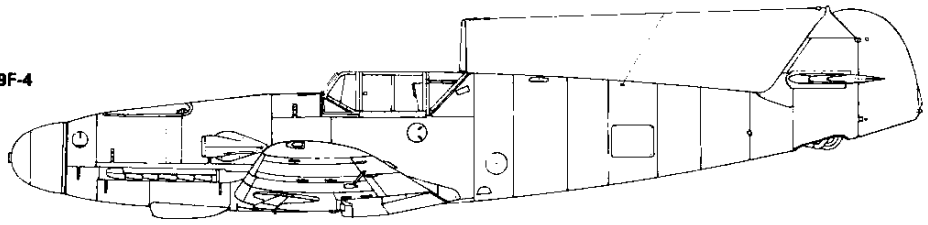


All drawings on this page are of a Messerschmitt Bf 109G-4, and are to 1/72nd scale

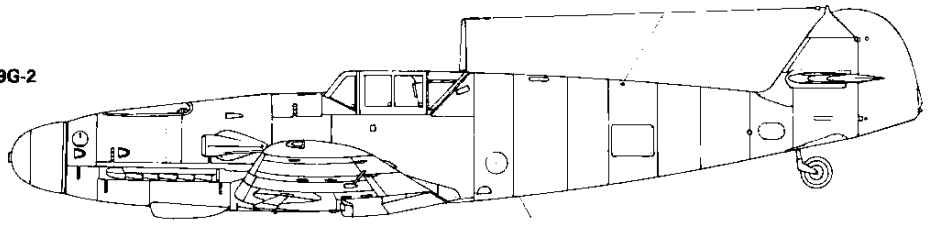
Bf 109E-4/B fitted with SD-2
Splitterbomben **panniers**



Bf 109F-4



Bf 109G-2



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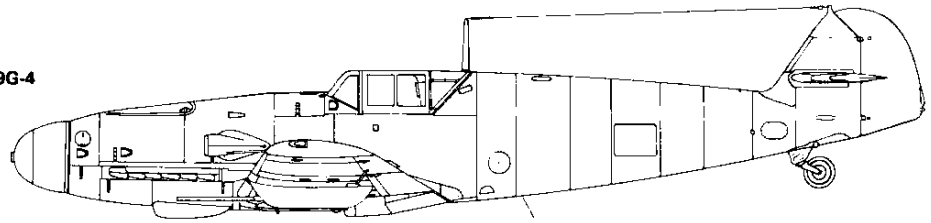
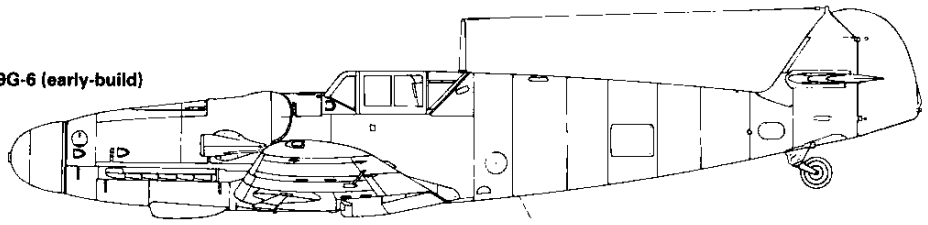
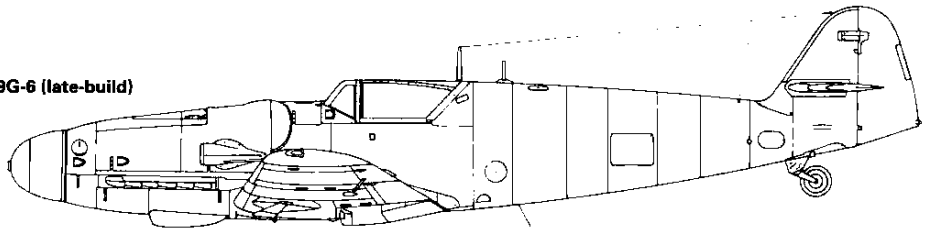


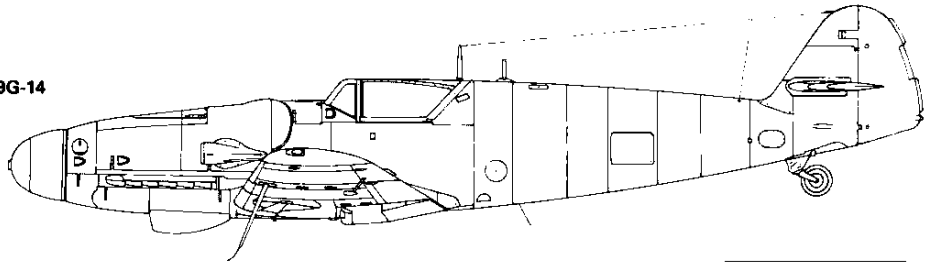
Bf 109G-6 (early-build)



Bf 109G-6 (late-build)



Bf 109G-14



COLOUR PLATES

1

Bf 109F-2 'White Triple Chevron' of Major Günther Lützow, *Geschwaderkommodore* JG 3, Hostynne, June 1941

One of three *Friedrichs* available to Günther Lützow at the start of *Barbarossa*, this machine carries prominent early eastern front yellow theatre markings. It also wears Lützow's preferred style of *Kommodore* insignia – a triple chevron. Although superficially similar to the aircraft he had flown in France immediately prior to JG 3's transfer eastwards (see *Aircraft of the Aces 29*, colour profile 11), this is not the same machine, as it displays several minor differences.

2

Bf 109G-2 'Black Chevron and Bars' of Major Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke, *Geschwaderkommodore* JG 3 'Udet', Morosovskaya, November 1942

Lützow's successor at the head of JG 3 also enjoyed a *Kommodore*'s perks, for this is one of at least two *Gustavs* kept at Major Wilcke's disposal during the winter of 1942-43. They wore the more usual style of markings for a *Geschwaderkommodore*, and featured a much broader aft fuselage yellow theatre band. Note, too, the winged red 'U' unit badge, which was introduced when JG 3 was formally named the *Jagdgeschwader* 'Udet' on 1 December 1941 following the death of Ernst Udet, the Luftwaffe's Chief of Aircraft Procurement and Supply.

3

Bf 109F-2 'Black Chevron and Triangle' of Hauptmann Hans von Hahn, *Gruppenkommandeur* I./JG 3, Luzk, July 1941

A somewhat unusual camouflage scheme and set of *Kommandeur's* insignia adorned Hans von Hahn's F-2 during the opening weeks of *Barbarossa*. In addition to the *Gruppe's 'Tatzelwurm'* emblem on the nose, the machine sported von Hahn's personal badge under the windscreen. Like his namesake, Hans *'Assi'* Hahn of western front fame, von Hahn chose a rooster's head ('Hahn' meaning cockerel in German). Below the cockpit sill on the starboard side was the coat-of-arms of von Hahn's home town, Frankfurt-am-Main. At this stage the rudder scoreboard displays fifteen western kills (plus three balloons) and the first nine of his Soviet victories. He would add ten more to the latter before I./JG 3 left the eastern front to become II./JG 1.

4

Bf 109F-2 'Black Chevron and Circle' of Leutnant Detlev Rohwer, *Gruppen-TO* I./JG 3, Byelaya-Zerkov, August 1941

The *Friedrich* of von Hahn's Technical Officer sported an even more distinctive camouflage pattern. Rohwer's machine also retained the yellow nose (with rectangular cut-out for the *Gruppe* emblem) more associated with the Battle of Britain period. His personal badge was a cartoon rendition of Germany's medieval knight-adventurer Götz von Berlichingen in a decidedly bawdy pose (depicting Götz's invitation to his enemies to 'kiss my a..e'!). Four western victories and all but one of Rohwer's final tally of 24 Russian kills are carried on the rudder. The half-length bars (also seen on von Hahn's machine above) indicate aircraft destroyed on the ground.

5

Bf 109F-4 'White Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Kurt Brändle, *Gruppenkommandeur* II./JG 3 'Udet', Tusow, August 1942

Kurt Brändle was one of JG 3's highest scorers, with a final overall total of 180 enemy aircraft destroyed (160 in the east). The 95 kill bars on the rudder of his *Friedrich* show that he is already over halfway to achieving that tally, and also offer a clue as to time and place – mid-August 1942 on the road to Stalingrad. Note that in addition to the *Geschwader's* 'Winged U', Brändle's machine is wearing II. *Gruppe's* heraldic gyronny shield below the windscreen.

6

Bf 109F-4 'Yellow 7' of Oberleutnant Viktor Bauer, *Staffelkapitän* 9./JG 3 'Udet', Szolzy, March 1942

With its pilot yet to reach the halfway mark of his final score of 106 (as witness the 42 victory bars on the rudder), Bauer's F-4 displays a somewhat worn overall white finish as the first winter of the war in the east nears its end. Note that the slushy conditions have necessitated the removal of the mainwheel leg covers. As was common with III./JG 3, this machine does not carry the *Geschwader* badge, but wears in its place the *Gruppe's* own 'Double-headed axe'.

7

Bf 109F-4 'Yellow 4' of Oberfeldwebel Eberhard von Boremski, 9./JG 3 'Udet', Zhuguyev, May 1942

In early spring 1942 III./JG 3 retired briefly to Germany for re-equipment. Its new aircraft had been destined for the Mediterranean – some even retained tropical filters – and wore that theatre's standard tan and light blue camouflage scheme (see *Aircraft of the Aces 2*). This was toned down by large segments of dark green and light grey before the *Gruppe* returned to the east. In addition, every 9. *Staffel* machine apparently sported the name of its pilot's wife or girl friend below the cockpit. Von Boremski's 'Maxi' (for Maxine?) also displays 43 kills on the rudder. His final eastern front total would reach 84.

8

Bf 109F-4 'White Triple Chevron' of Hauptmann Franz Hahn, *Gruppenkommandeur* I./JG 4, Mizil/Rumania, January 1943

Arguably one of the least known fighter units to see service in the east was JG 4. Its I. *Gruppe* was initially deployed in defence of the Rumanian oilfields, where the opposition was predominantly American. Although the *Geschwader* produced no outstanding aces, this profile is included not only for the sake of completeness, but also on the strength of its pilot – yet another Hahn! – Franz *'Gockel'* ('Rooster') Hahn having already scored some 17+ kills as *Staffelkapitän* of 11./JG 51 (the ex-2./JG 77), prior to assuming command of I./JG 4 in the autumn of 1942. Hahn's choice of command

insignia (the triple chevron more usually associated with a *Geschwaderkommodore* – see profile 1 for example), may perhaps be explained by the fact that I. *Gruppe* was still the only component of JG 4 in existence at this time.

9

Bf 109E-7 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Günther Scholz, *Gruppenkommandeur* III./JG 5, Petsamo/Finland, September 1942

Spending much of its time astride and above the Arctic Circle, and thus somewhat isolated from the major ground battles along the main fronts, JG 5 nonetheless produced five 100+ *Experten*. Although Günther Scholz was not one of them – his score climbing little higher than the 30 depicted here – he did end the war as *Kommodore* of the *Geschwader* (while at the same time serving as *Jafü Norwegen*). Note III. *Gruppe's* badge (a Lapland fur boat on a Finnish cross) and Scholz's personal emblem – a cute young lady baring the same part of her anatomy as Götz von Berlichingen!

10

Bf 109G-2 'Yellow 12' of Oberleutnant Heinrich Ehrler, Staffelkapitän 6./JG 5, Petsamo/Finland, March 1943

Most successful of the Arctic's 'Big Five' was Heinrich Ehrler. References to his final score vary between 201 and 220. To provide a camouflage scheme more suited to the terrain over which it was operating, Ehrler's early *Gustav* has been given a coat of washable white paint (including the fuselage cross), to which large irregular patches of dark green have been added. Note the 77 Soviet kills that have been carefully recorded on the rudder.

11

Bf 109G-2 'White 4' of Oberleutnant Theodor Weissenberger, *Staffelkapitän* 7./JG 5, Petsamo/Finland, July 1943

Like Ehrler, Weissenberger also scored over 200 victories, but 'only' 175 of these were claimed in the east. His G-2 is seen here in the same standard grey finish which is hidden by the temporary winter camouflage of 'Yellow 12' (above). His rudder, too, displays a meticulous scoreboard – a Knight's Cross garlanded with oak leaves and surmounted by an eagle to denote his century, plus 12 individual kill bars below. The last five of these were a brace or Airacobras and a trio of Pe-2s all claimed on 25 July 1943. They would bring him the Oak Leaves proper eight days later.

12

Bf 109E-7 'Yellow 1' of Oberleutnant Erbo Graf von Kageneck, *Staffelkapitän* 9./JG 27, Solzy, August 1941

Although JG 27 did not remain in the east long enough for its pilots to rack up huge scores, several of its members enjoyed considerable success in the opening phases of *Barbarossa*. One such was Erbo Graf von Kageneck, who claimed 48 Soviet kills between June and October 1941 – 27 of them are recorded here, along with 18 earlier western victories. Note the lack of a III. *Gruppe* vertical bar, III./JG 27's unique practice of displaying its aircraft's individual numbers on the engine cowling (a custom introduced during its time as the original I./JG 1) presumably being deemed sufficient for purposes of in-*Geschwader* identification.

13

Bf 109F-4 'Black Chevron and Bars' of Major Karl-Gottfried Nordmann, *Geschwaderkommodore* JG 51 'Mölders', Shatalovka, Summer 1942

Bearing standard finish plus a textbook set of eastern front markings and *Kommodore's* insignia, this *Friedrich* is otherwise devoid of any form of unit or personal badge. It is, in fact, the mount of Major Karl-Gottfried Nordmann, who commanded JG 51 from April 1942 to March 1944. Nordmann had added 69 Soviet kills to his earlier tally of nine western victories by the time his involvement in a mid-air collision on 17 January 1943 ended his frontline career.

14

Bf 109G-6 'White 9' of Leutnant Günther Josten, 1./JG 51 'Mölders', Bobruisk, Spring 1944

After having re-equipped with Fw 190s towards the end of 1942, JG 51 converted back on to the Bf 109 early in 1944. Despite being seen here with a ventral bomb-rack, this anonymous *Gustav* was flown by one of the *Geschwader's* foremost *Experten*. For as well as carrying out some 80 fighter-bomber sorties, Günther Josten claimed 178 aerial victories in the east. This total included more than 60 *Stormoviks*, plus one Eighth Air Force B-17 (downed on a supply-dropping mission to Warsaw on 18 September 1944).

15

Bf 109F 'Yellow 7' of Oberleutnant Heinrich Krafft, *Staffelkapitän* 8./JG 51 'Mölders', Stolzy, March 1942

This winter-camouflaged *Friedrich* displays on its rudder the 46 victories (all but four scored in the east) which won the Knight's Cross for its pilot on 18 March 1942. *'Gaudi'* Krafft would be promoted to *Kommandeur* of I. *Gruppe* on 1 June, and had taken his overall total to 78 before being brought down by Soviet anti-aircraft fire on 14 December 1942.

16

Bf 109F 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Josef Fözö, *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 51, Stara-Bychov, July 1941

Austrian-born Fözö had already claimed three I-16s, during his time with the *Condor Legion*, and 18 western victories before JG 51 was transferred to the east. There, however, two serious injuries – one as *Kommandeur* of II./JG 51, and the second when commanding I. *Gruppe* – severely curtailed his operational career. This *Friedrich* displays two points of interest. The white silhouette on the first kill bar represents a French observation balloon shot down on 13 March 1940. This profile also shows that II./JG 51 had by now discontinued its earlier practice of positioning the *Gruppe* badge on the aft fuselage in lieu of the regulation horizontal bar (see examples in *Aircraft of the Aces 11*, pages 33 and 58). Although the bar is now in evidence, the *Gruppe* – still non-conformist – have wedged it between Fözö's *Kommandeur* chevrons and the fuselage cross.

17

Bf 109G-2 'Yellow 5' of Feldwebel Anton Hafner, 6./JG 51 'Mölders', Orel-North, August 1942

One of II./JG 51's early *Gustavs* also illustrates the unit's unique custom of wearing its horizontal *Gruppe* bar ahead of

both the fuselage cross and the individual aircraft number. Having already gained his first 62 Soviet victories, the pilot of this machine, Feldwebel – later Oberleutnant – Anton Hafner, would emerge as JG 51's highest scorer with a final total of 204 kills before his own death in action against a Yak-9 over East Prussia on 17 October 1944 when *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 51. It should be borne in mind, however, that part of Hafner's double century had been scored in the Mediterranean, and while flying the Fw 190 upon his return to Russia.

18

Bf 109F-4 'Red 12' of Oberfeldwebel Heinz Klöpper, 11./JG 51 'Mölders', Dugino, September 1942

Another of JG 51's highly successful NCO pilots whose aircraft displayed both an unusual *Gruppe* marking and an impressive scoreboard was 11. *Staffel's* Heinz Klöpper. The 65 kill bars on the rudder earned him the Knight's Cross on 4 September 1942. The smaller, simplified cross behind the fuselage *Balkenkreuz* was an uncommon, but not unique, method of identifying a IV. *Gruppe* machine. Klöpper would claim a total of 86 Soviet kills before his promotion to oberleutnant and transfer to the west as *Staffelkapitän* of 7./JG 1.

19

Bf 109G-6 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Gerhard Barkhorn, *Gruppenkommandeur* I./JG 52, Kharkov-South, August 1943

There is little to distinguish this standard, and rather plain, *Gustav* other than the name below the cockpit. 'Christl' was the wife of Gerhard Barkhorn, the second most successful fighter pilot in the history of aerial warfare. At this stage the *Kommandeur* of I. *Gruppe* was already well on the way to his double century. He would survive the war with a staggering final total of 301 kills, all scored on the eastern front.

20

Bf 109G-6 'Red 4' of Oberfeldwebel Rudolf Trenkel, 2./JG 52, Poltava, July 1943

One of Barkhorn's high-scoring, but relatively little known, NCO pilots was Rudolf Trenkel of 2. *Staffel*. This *Gustav*, which Trenkel was flying at the time of *Zitadelle*, was even more anonymous than the *Kommandeur's* machine above, and is completely lacking any unit or personal markings. Such caution was not merely a matter of denying intelligence to the enemy. Many pilots were by now wary of disclosing their identities and successes in case they were forced down behind enemy lines. In fact Trenkel would survive unscathed (despite having to bail out five times in one ten-day period), and would end the war as *Kapitän* of 2./JG 52 with a total of 138 victories.

21

Bf 109G-2 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Johannes Steinhoff, *Gruppenkommandeur* II./JG 52, Rostov, August 1942

Although giving nothing away intelligence-wise, *'Mäcki'* Steinhoff's G-2 presents a more interesting appearance with its three-colour spinner, densely dappled engine cowling and obvious signs of overpainting on its rear fuselage. Another of JG 52's solid core of 100+ *Experten*, Johannes Steinhoff amassed 148 victories in the east before transferring to the Mediterranean and thence to the Reich. He was seriously burned on 18 April 1945 when his Me 262 crashed on take-off, but survived his injuries to head the post-war German air force.

22

Bf 109G-6 'White 1' of Hauptmann Erich Hartmann, *Staffelkapitän* 4./JG 52, Budaörs/Hungary, November 1944

One pilot who positively advertised his presence in the air was the one known to the Russians as the 'Black Devil of the South'. This is the late model G-6 flown by Erich Hartmann after he relinquished his year-long command of 9. *Staffel* to set up a new 4./JG 52 in October 1944. Although the machine retains the distinctive black 'tulip-leaf' which was Hartmann's individual marking, the 'Karaya' *Staffel's* famous 'pierced heart' emblem below the cockpit is now a plain red heart bearing the name *'Usch'* (for Ursula, whom Hartmann had married two months previously). Note, however, there is no record of Hartmann's current score, which by this time was well above the 300 mark.

23

Bf 109G-4 'Black 12' of Leutnant Peter Düttmann, 5./JG 52, Anapa, May 1943

Back to 1943 and anonymity for this earlier *Gustav*, which was flown over the Kuban bridgehead by the newly-arrived Leutnant Peter Düttmann. In his two years at the front *'Bonifaz'* Düttmann was shot down, or was forced to land, no fewer than 19 times. But he gave as good as he got, however, claiming nine kills in one day alone on 7 May 1944. He ended the war as *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 52 with a total of 150 aerial victories (and two tanks destroyed, which were counted as kills in 1945!), plus a further 42 unconfirmed.

24

Bf 109G-2 'Yellow 5' of Leutnant Walter Krupinski, 6./JG 52, Armavir, August 1942

Still sporting the now seldom seen 'Winged sword' badge of JG 52 beneath the windscreen, 'Yellow 5' was the mount of Walter 'Graf Punski' Krupinski, who was to be a major influence on the early career of one Erich Hartmann. After a year serving as *Staffelkapitän* of 7./JG 52, Krupinski himself was transferred to the west where he commanded, in turn, 1./JG 5, II./JG 11 and III./JG 26, before ending the war flying Me 262s with JV 44. His eastern front victories totalled 177.

25

Bf 109G-4 'Yellow 3' of Unteroffizier Hans Waldmann, 6./JG 52, Anapa, June 1943

Another of JG 52's successful young NCOs, 'Dackel' Waldmann had already scored 53 kills in the nine months up to June 1943. By the end of May 1944 his final eastern front total had reached 125. He, too, transferred to the west and later converted on to the Me 262, but was killed in a mid-air collision in the closing weeks of the war when serving as *Staffelkapitän* of 3./JG 7. This particular G-4 is apparently a new delivery, hence the areas of fresh paint covering the four-letter code applied at the factory. Note also the small dimensions of the individual aircraft number common to the

Gruppe's aircraft at this period. The personal emblem is a play on the pilot's nickname, 'Waldmann' ('Woodsman') also being a favourite name for a pet Dackel, or dachshund.

26

Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 3' of Leutnant Heinz Ewald, 6./JG 52, Zilistea/Rumania, June 1944

Reflecting II./JG 52's brief period of service in the specialised anti-bomber role defending the Rumanian oilfields against high-flying US 'heavies', this G-6 *'Kanonenboot'* (Gunboat) is equipped with 20 mm underwing cannon gondolas and sports a spiral spinner (widely believed to throw off the aim of the enemy bombers' gunners). It also bears another word-play personal emblem, Heinz Ewald's nickname being 'Esau' ('E-sow'). Like Waldmann, Ewald also flew many missions as Barkhorn's wingman before he assumed command of 7./JG 52 in February 1945. His score at the war's end stood at 84.

27

Bf 109G-2 'Black 13' of Oberleutnant Günther Rall, *Staffelkapitän* 8./JG 52, Gostanovka, August 1942

The third of JG 52's triumvirate of top scorers, Oberleutnant Günther Rall flew this 'Black 13' upon his return to the command of 8. *Staffel* on 28 August 1942, exactly nine months to the day after being severely wounded the previous November. At that time he had claimed just 36 kills. He would add 235 more Soviet victories to his score (latterly as *Kommandeur* of III./JG 52) before his transfer to the west in the spring of 1944. Note III. *Gruppe's* 'Barbed cross' badge forward of the windshield, and wavy bar symbol on the aft fuselage.

28

Bf 109G-2 'Yellow 11' of Oberleutnant Hermann Graf, *Staffelkapitän* 9./JG 52, Pitomnik, September 1942

The same *Gruppe* badge adorns the *Gustav* of fellow-*Staffelkapitän* Hermann Graf. But this machine also carries 9./JG 52's famous 'Pierced heart' emblem, albeit without the word 'Karaya' – the *Staffel's* equally celebrated radio call-sign – beneath it. As with most of the 'Karaya' *Staffel's* machines, the red heart has a girl's name (*Elli?*) superimposed on it in tiny white letters. Graf reportedly scored his 150th kill in this aircraft on 4 September. After service in the west (where he claimed ten US 'heavies') Graf returned to JG 52 in October 1944, this time as *Kommodore* – a position he held until the end. His final tally of Soviet kills numbered 202.

29

Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 1' of Leutnant Erich Hartmann, *Staffelkapitän* 9./JG 52, Novo-Zaporozhe, October 1943

The mount of the 'Karaya' *Staffel's* most famous *Kapitän*, Leutnant - later Oberleutnant - Erich Hartmann. The century motif and additional 21 individual victory bars date this as 2 October 1943 (on this day Hartmann claimed four kills – a brace of La-5s, a Pe-2 and an Airacobra). But he was still 27 victories – and 27 days – away from winning the Knight's Cross! Note that the distinctive 'tulip-leaf' nose decoration has yet to put in an appearance, as has the name *'Ursel'* - for fiancée Ursula Paetsch – which would grace the pierced heart. For some reason the inscription worn on the *Staffel* emblem at this time reportedly read *'Dicker Max'* ('Fat Max')!

30

Bf 109F-2 'Black Chevron and Bars' of Major Günther Freiherr von Maltzahn, *Geschwaderkommodore* JG 53, Byelaya-Zerkov, July 1941

Although not a high scorer himself, 'Henri' von Maltzahn was one of the *Jagdwaffe's* true leaders (a quality recognised by the award of the Knight's Cross back in December 1940, when his personal score stood at just 13 – a far cry from Hartmann's 148!). Here, the tail of his *Friedrich* displays all 20 of his western victories to date, plus the additional 22 Soviet kills which won him the Oak Leaves on 24 July 1941. He would end his three years as *Kommodore* of JG 53 with a final tally of 68 victories – 35 in the west and 33 in the east.

31

Bf 109F-2 'Black Chevron and Circle/Bar' of Leutnant Jürgen Harder, *Gruppenstab* III./JG 53, Sobolevo, June 1941

Bearing a single kill bar on the rudder for his first Soviet victim (an 'I-17' claimed on the opening day of *Barbarossa*), Harder's F-2 also displays a heavily dappled cowling – the result of heavy-handed overspraying of the earlier Channel front yellow – and an unusual *Gruppenstab* symbol. It has been suggested that the latter denotes the combined duties of an adjutant and TO. One of three fighter-pilot brothers, none of whom would survive the war, the name below the cockpit commemorates the first brother to be killed in action – Hauptmann Harro Harder, *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 53, who was shot down off the Isle of Wight on 12 August 1940. As *Kommodore* of JG 11, Jürgen Harder would lose his life in a crash near Berlin early in 1945. His final score of 64 included 17 eastern front victories.

32

Bf 109G-2 'White Chevron and Bars' of Major Hannes Trautloft, *Geschwaderkommodore* JG 54, Siverskaya, Summer 1942

Another celebrated fighter leader who put the welfare and success of his *Geschwader* before personal ambition, Hannes Trautloft's eastern front score of 45 was modest by some standards, but his contribution to JG 54 was incalculable. He flew at least three machines similarly (but not identically) marked to the example depicted here. All wore a non-standard segmented camouflage (of two-tone green, or tan and green) which accentuated the white *Kommodore's* insignia. Note, also, that the famous 'Green Heart' *Geschwader* badge features the crests of JG 54's three component *Gruppen* in miniature.

33

Bf 109F-2 'Black Chevron and Bars' of Hauptmann Hans Philipp, *Gruppenkommandeur* I./JG 54, Siverskaya, March 1942

Despite its *Major beim Stab* insignia, this rather worn winter-camouflaged *Friedrich* is the machine flown by Hans Philipp, *Kommandeur* of I. *Gruppe*, as he neared his century in the early months of 1942. He would be the fourth member of the *Jagdwaffe* to reach the 100 mark (on 31 March 1942), and the second to achieve the double century (behind Hermann Graf) a little less than a year later on 17 March 1943. He transferred to the west as *Kommodore* of JG 1 shortly thereafter, only to

be killed in action against P-47s in October 1943. All but 29 of his 206 victories had been claimed in Russia.

34

Bf 109F 'White 8' of Leutnant Walter Nowotny, 1./JG 54, Ryelbitzi, Summer 1942

Also sporting the *Geschwader's* 'Green Heart' and the badge of I. *Gruppe*, 'White 8' was flown by 1. *Staffel's* Walter Nowotny. Although more properly associated with the Focke-Wulf Fw 190 (see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 6 - Fw 190 Aces of the Russian Front*), Nowotny's first half-century and more were scored on Bf 109s. The rudder of this *Friedrich* shows that he is already well on the way to his Knight's Cross, awarded on 4 September for 56 kills. Altogether, his final eastern front tally would be 255. Note, incidentally, that the green heart emblem has been embellished with Nowotny's personal 'lucky 13'.

35

Bf 109F 'Black 8' of Feldwebel Otto Kittel, 2./JG 54, Krasnogvardeisk, May 1942

Very similar to the aircraft in profile 34 (albeit minus the rudder scoreboard), and also by chance a number '8', this machine was an early mount of the NCO pilot who was destined to become JG 54's highest scorer. Before his death in action in February 1945, the little-known Otto Kittel would be credited with no fewer than 267 Soviet kills. In fact, he was the fourth most successful eastern front *Experte* after JG 52's 'top three'. Although the vast majority of his claims were made on the Fw 190, Kittel – like Nowotny – cut his operational teeth on Bf 109s. It was, however, a long and laborious process. In the eight months leading up to May 1942 he had achieved just 15 victories.

36

Bf 109E 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Herbert Ihlefeld, *Gruppenkommandeur* I.(J)/LG 2, Jassy/Rumania, July 1941

With I./JG 77 operating semi-autonomously in northern Scandinavia (where it later formed the nucleus of I./JG 5), the vacant I. *Gruppe* slot in the parent JG 77 was long filled by I.(J)/LG 2. Here, the *Kommandeur's Emil* displays both that *Gruppe's* badge – an elaborate 'L' (for Lehr) and a map of Great Britain (now somewhat out of place in Rumania) – plus 36 kill bars representing his western victories to date. To the latter a further ten Soviet kills have already been added. The fifth pilot to achieve the century (on 22 April 1942), Ihlefeld subsequently commanded various *Geschwader* in both east and west. His eastern front total was 67.

37

Bf 109F-4 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Anton Mader, *Gruppenkommandeur* II./JG 77, Stary Oskol, September 1942

Another *Kommandeur's* machine, this time of II. *Gruppe*, as witness the badge below the windscreen and horizontal bar aft of the fuselage cross. But no sign on that pristine (and rather unusual) white rudder of Mader's current tally of 62 Soviet kills. Like Ihlefeld, Mader would later command both eastern and western front *Jagdgeschwader*, ending the war with a combined total of 86 victories.

38

Bf 109F-4 'Black 5' of Oberleutnant Anton Hackl, *Staffelkapitän* 5./JG 77, Kastornoje, September 1942

No hesitation on the part of Anton Hackl, *Kapitän* of Mader's 5. *Staffel*, in proclaiming his score. All but the first four of the 117 kill bars carefully recorded on the rudder of this *Friedrich* are eastern front victories, the last two denoting a brace of Il-2s downed on 18 September. 'Toni' Hackl was yet another alumnus of JG 77 who would go on to command various *Jagdgeschwader*. Some 130 out of his final total of 192 had been claimed in the east.

39

Bf 109G-2 'White Chevron/Yellow 1' of Hauptmann Kurt Ubben, *Gruppenkommandeur* III./JG 77, Lyuban, September 1942

A distinctly idiosyncratic set of markings adorn this early *Gustav* 'gunboat' – unusual *Kommandeur's* insignia (presumably indicating Ubben's position as No 1 in the *Stabskette*), a yellow theatre band centred on the fuselage cross (a custom more associated with JG 54) and no *Gruppe* symbol on the aft fuselage (III./JG 77 appear to have discarded their oversized 'wavy bar' at the end of the Balkans campaign). What remains is the *Gruppe's* 'Wolf's head' badge and a careful record of Ubben's 84 kills to date. In all, 'Kuddel' Ubben would claim 90 Soviet kills with JG 77 before assuming command of JG 2 in the west. He was killed in action over France in April 1944.

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Bf 109F 'White 1' of Oberleutnant Wolfdieter Huy, *Staffelkapitän* 7./JG 77, Lunga/Rumania, August 1941

Another slightly unusual, but not unique, positioning of the yellow theatre band, this time ahead of the fuselage cross. It was first introduced on III./JG 77's Bf 109s during the recent Balkans campaign. Huy's *Friedrich* also carries the *Gruppe* badge, but no aft fuselage symbol. The ship silhouettes on the rudder refer back to his anti-shipping activities off Greece and Crete. Since then he has been credited with a dozen Soviet kills. Huy would claim 37 victories in the east before III./JG 77 transferred back to the Mediterranean area, where he was shot down and captured on 29 October 1942.

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JOHN WEAL, Osprey's primary Luftwaffe author/artist, has written and/or illustrated six titles in the Aircraft of the Aces series dealing with German aircraft/pilots, plus supplied artwork for a further six books in the list. Possessing one of the largest private collections of original German-language literature from World War 2, his research is firmly based on this huge archive.

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A freelance airbrush artist since the days of the monthly *RAF Flying Review*, and its various successors, Weal also helps his German wife run a small technical translation and interpreting agency. But apart from the compilation of a World War 2 aircraft directory, and one or two infrequent magazine articles since, his numerous volumes in the *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces*, *Combat Aircraft* and new *Aviation Elite* series are the first time John Weal has been invited to put pen to paper, and thus make use of his extensive knowledge of the Luftwaffe's organisation and operations.

He is presently working on a history of *Jagdgeschwader* 54 'Green Hearts' for publication in the Aviation Elite series.

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